

THE SERMON AS A WRITTEN ART-FORM

by

Glendon E. Harris

A professional project  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Ministry  
School of Theology at Claremont  
May 1979

*This professional project, completed by*

Glendon E. Harris

---

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

*Henry Küzenga*  
*Ronald E. Osborn*

---

*April 5, 1979*  
Date

*Joseph C. Hooper*  
Dean

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT . . . . .	v
Chapter	
1. THE NEED . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	1
Writing for the ear . . . . .	7
2. THE SERMON AS A WRITTEN COMPOSITION . . . . .	10
Length . . . . .	12
Revising and polishing . . . . .	13
Strengthening copy . . . . .	16
3. THE FORM OF THE WRITTEN SERMON . . . . .	18
4. PREPARATION FOR WRITING . . . . .	26
Introduction . . . . .	26
The effort for writing . . . . .	29
5. THE SERMON IDEA . . . . .	35
The source of sermon ideas . . . . .	36
Developing the idea . . . . .	44
6. THE WRITING OF THE SERMON . . . . .	49
The model sermon . . . . .	49
Analysis of the model sermon . . . . .	53
The title . . . . .	53
The sermon introduction . . . . .	55
The body of the sermon . . . . .	58
The conclusion . . . . .	63

Chapter

7. ELEMENTS OF STYLE AND TECHNIQUES IN	
SERMON WRITING . . . . .	69
Clarity. . . . .	70
Words. . . . .	72
Interesting content. . . . .	78
Omitting . . . . .	85
Believability. . . . .	87
Beauty . . . . .	95
8. SUMMARY. . . . .	97
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	103

## ABSTRACT

To the knowledge of this writer a book solely devoted to sermon writing has yet to be written. Books abound on preaching and many of them touch on the craft of sermon construction and writing to some degree, but none address themselves exclusively to the technical skills necessary for writing sermons. Most books, in fact, deal almost exclusively with oral skills and the exegetical techniques of sermon preparation.

This project is an attempt to lift up the need for such a book (or manual) dealing with the mechanics of writing sermons and to set forth the fundamentals of writing for the pulpit and how the implementation of sound writing techniques can improve the general quality of sermons and, subsequently, preaching.

It is recognized that preaching has traditionally been an oral skill. The contention of this paper is that the skill can be enhanced with carefully prepared manuscripts, noting, of course, that the sermon is delivered in as free a style as possible from the manuscript. The manuscript is to serve the preacher much as a musical score serves a musician, as a basic guide, carefully prepared, yet leaving room for interpretation in the final rendition.

After the preaching, the written sermon remains and constitutes a legitimate and significant literary genre or

art-form. It should be strong enough to then stand on its literary merits and can be if carefully constructed according to the disciplines of good writing.

## Chapter 1

## THE NEED

Introduction.

Charles Clayton Morrison, longtime editor of The Christian Century, once wrote: "For a number of years I have been a modern Diogenes going about with my homiletical lantern in search of a good sermon. When I found one it was a rather exciting experience because I found so few."<sup>1</sup>

Leander E. Keck, a professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology and a frequent lecturer on preaching, writes: "The pastor who still devotes a major block of his time preparing sermons -- especially scholarly or biblical ones -- has been on the endangered species list for a long time."<sup>2</sup>

Similar assessments on the state of sermon quality abound. It can be generally assumed that there is a paucity of good sermons. They are "mediocre at best,"<sup>3</sup> "pitiful

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles Clayton Morrison, quoted in Peter Eldersveld "The Modern Pulpit," a sermon preached on "The Back to God Hour," radio broadcast of The Christian Reformed Church, originating in Chicago.

<sup>2</sup>Leander E. Keck, The Bible in the Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Halford Luccock, In the Minister's Workshop (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 42.

little homilies,"<sup>4</sup> "an appalling collection of disorganized chatter."<sup>5</sup>

Several reasons have been set forth as to why preaching, and sermons in particular, have gone into eclipse. The sermon has more competition, is one reason cited. The preacher no longer has "a monopoly on the ear."<sup>6</sup> W. E. Sangster elucidated on this thought when he wrote:

To some, the sermon seems a relic of the past and of more spacious days, days of quiet and recollection when Sunday was not invaded by radio and television, Sunday newspapers and games, and the dreary crocodile of cars trying to carry their exhausted occupants to the already overcrowded beaches. Against such a background, and against so many rival occupations and interests, what hope has the preacher of attracting people to his pulpit?<sup>7</sup>

Preaching is an anachronism, is another reason given for the demise of quality preaching and the poor quality of sermons. Sangster also spoke to this point, with tongue in cheek, when he wrote that

The whole idea (preaching) is archaic. You might as well expect people to come to a magic-lantern show instead of to the Cinerama, or to a penny-reading instead of listening to the Brains Trust. The sermon, they say, is out-of-date and worthless. Other ways

---

<sup>4</sup>Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), p. vii.

<sup>5</sup>David Moyers on television program "David Moyer's Journal," date unknown.

<sup>6</sup>H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>W. E. Sangster, The Craft of the Sermon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 31.



are now available for the spread of Christian teaching -- the confessional, the discussion group, the study circle, the paperbacked volume, the religious play, the short article in the Saturday newspaper.<sup>8</sup>

Time is another factor working against good sermon preparation, some way. The miasmata of duties crowd out sermon preparation time. "Group dynamics, pastoral counseling, community outreach -- all good within themselves -- stand between the pulpit and the pew. The modern Christian pastor has many roles to fill in his ministry," a United Methodist Bishop states.<sup>9</sup>

George Sweazey, longtime homiletics professor at Princeton University, speaks of this as the "maceration" of the minister by his many functions: pastor, preacher, administrator, educator, counselor. Sweazey writes:

With the confusion of the unpredictable demands, the minister is likely to get to them as they come, without giving them priorities. It is ironic that the highly important duty of preparing to preach is the one he can most readily postpone.... The minister's working time is crossed up with other people's. Their days off are working days for him. He must do much of his work at night, when people can be available for calls and meetings. His unscheduled hours are the very ones when his mind is at its best for thinking about sermons. People may see no reason why minister should not be interrupted at those hours.<sup>10</sup>

Phillips Brooks, in commenting on the decay in

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>Carl J. Sanders, "We Need to Improve Preaching," United Methodist Reporter (January 11, 1974).

<sup>10</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 106.

homiletics"<sup>11</sup> laid it to a lack of time on the preacher's part. "Their lives are so full nowadays that they can neither store their minds by adequate reading nor devote enough time to the preparation of their sermons."<sup>12</sup>

Granting that these all are contributing causes to inadequate and leaden sermons, it is the contention of this writer that a more basic cause is that preachers simply do not know how to compose sermons. They lack the fundamentals of language, the technical skills of incisive writing, and the craft of composition. While much of sermon construction may be a matter of taste or of individual preference, yet there does seem to exist a body of do's and don'ts the violation of which spells success or failure in sermon writing. Preaching, to put new teeth in an old saw, is too important to be left to preachers. Journalistic and literary and artistic skills and disciplines must be brought to bear upon sermon composition.

Much of sermonizing falls in the realm of native talent, as does any artistic ability. As one seminary professor of preaching put it, "I've decided that if they can preach, they can preach, if they can't, they can't, and there is nothing you can do about it."<sup>13</sup> This may be true,

---

<sup>11</sup>Brooks, p. viii.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Gerald Kennedy, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. ix.

but even those with innate ability need to understand the fundamentals of their art and craft and to express themselves within the discipline of those ground rules.

There is no need to establish the viability of the sermon; it has been proven over the several thousands of years it has been practiced. "Not even the most discouraged clergyman could doubt the efficacy of preaching in its influence upon the American people."<sup>14</sup> The sermon is a unique and legitimate communications form. "I for one," writes H. H. Farmer, "believe that there can be no substitute for the sermon, and I have little sympathy with the tendency in some quarters today to minimize it, and even to suggest we might get rid of it altogether."<sup>15</sup> The most recent Gallup poll on religion in America, released in mid-June, 1978, revealed that a majority of those no longer attending church worship services quit because of disappointment over preaching and that most would go back to church if they could find a church where there was good preaching.<sup>16</sup> Virgil Sexton traveled the church throughout America and wrote a book on his findings. In the book he writes:

---

<sup>14</sup>DeWitte T. Holland, Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit 1630-1967 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Farmer, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup>"Events and People," Christian Century, XCV (August 2, 1978), 441.

Thirty hearings in our Annual Conferences lead us to revise our feelings about the relevancy of preaching. People are pleading for good sermons in all situations. Our people are agreed that they want good preaching, that they fight to keep preachers who can preach, that the preaching hour still gets more commitments to important issues than all bureaucratic pronouncements and print.<sup>17</sup>

Substantiating this point, United Methodist Bishop Carl J. Sanders of the Alabama Area, states, "I have been in the Episcopacy only a short time but long enough for people to make their requests known and they plead for a preacher who can preach. In twelve years of the District Superintendency it was the same eloquent plea."<sup>18</sup> Maurice Egan, a Roman Catholic writer has said that "if the Protestant church ever dies, the dagger found in its heart will be the sermon."<sup>19</sup>

The great need in preaching today is to improve the quality of the sermon, which "is poorer than it needs to be."<sup>20</sup> The place to begin in this soulcraft is in the basics of sermon composition.

---

<sup>17</sup>Virgil Sexton, Listening to the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 81.

<sup>18</sup>Sanders.

<sup>19</sup>Halford Luccock, Communicating the Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 27.

<sup>20</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 12

Writing for the Ear.

A word should be said about the type of writing this paper is promoting. It is writing for the ear rather than for the eye. This is necessitated, of course, by virtue of the sermon being a manuscript for oral presentation. It has been said that "the test of good writing is permanence, and the test of good speech is immediacy of apprehension and response."<sup>21</sup> A good sermon should have both.

Much of what is written today is for the ear. The scripts for radio and television are prime examples. The great speeches of Churchill, Roosevelt and other public figures, likewise, were composed for hearing. All playwrights write for the ear. Being written for the ear does not mean that they cannot have permanence in literary form. Churchill's words are a strong case in point, as well as the plays of Shakespeare. Much of the Bible remains as classic literature, even though it is mostly oral language.

Writing for listening is simply to put the words on paper as they would sound if being spoken. This can be done by sounding out the words and sentences in the mind before putting them on paper to "hear" how they will sound when spoken. Some writers even do this audibly. Some writers take care of this when rewriting and polishing. "Language

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

that is bad when spoken is bad when written," Davis asserts.<sup>22</sup> And if that is the case, the reverse is especially true: if it's bad when written it'll be bad when spoken. A careful writing for the ear overcomes such "bad language."

Writing for the ear is a learned process, but there are some general rules that govern it and serve as a starting point in learning such writing. Preachers must avoid complex sentences, high-flown words that may hide meaning. Sentences must be kept brief and direct, words should be simple, main ideas must be presented in several different ways. An over-use of adverbs and adjectives must be avoided; verbs and nouns will get the heaviest use. The effective sermon writer also chooses words that sound well together and strives for a rhythm that will make the phrases pleasing.

H. H. Farmer gives a good example of "academic writing" as opposed to the type of writing a sermon should have:

I once heard this sentence in a sermon: 'We learn from Jesus that the object of God's affection is man.'.... 'The object of God's affection' -- how terribly abstract. 'Man' -- also abstract. 'We learn' -- whom does that refer to? Now listen: 'God says to you through Christ that He loves you, and you, and you, and all men.' Direct, simple -- concrete verb instead of abstract noun, God the subject and you another subject, the I-thou relationship.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Farmer, p. 65.

Writing that is direct, clear, and easily apprehended through the ear, as Farmer did with the above, will stand the test of being understood immediately and years later in written form. In short, preaching is for the ear and a well-written manuscript will aid that process rather than hinder it. Tennessee Williams achieved, the easy dialogue of his plays by taking them through as many as four or five drafts, and a page of final draft might have a dozen changes penned into its typescript. It was hard work, but it was the only way to get words together that would be listened to, apprehended, and remembered. Good sermons come with the same hard work.

## Chapter 2

## THE SERMON AS A WRITTEN COMPOSITION

If preaching is chiefly an oral expression, why, then, must a sermon be written out? The main reason has been well stated by Merrill Abbey:

...the more deliberate pace of the pen chastens the headlong tongue. Many preachers who have spoken forcefully to throngs, often with few notes or none, have testified that they thought best with a pen in hand. When a preacher has written every word of a sermon, he has some assurance that he has thought it through in full. His manuscript may be left behind when he delivers the message, but it has served him and his people well by giving shape and coherence to his thought. Constant, painful writing offers those who speak much in public the best insurance against mere garrulity.<sup>1</sup>

Abbey touches on most of the reasons for writing out a sermon manuscript: exactness, thinking a subject through, getting one's best thought organized ahead of time, fixing the form in one's mind, coherent thought and expression, and avoidance of rambling.

Of these, exactness is extremely important. Sir Francis Bacon wrote in his essay "Of Studies": "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man."<sup>2</sup> To create an "exact" sermon it must be written out. There are a talented few whose mental machinery allows

---

<sup>1</sup>Merrill R. Abbey, Communication in Pulpit and Parish (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup>Alan B. Howes, An Outline of English Composition (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 82.



them to compose a sermon in their mind. But even they must do what most have to do on paper; that is, sketch out the sermon in their mind and spend the same amount of time and effort on it as those who must do it on paper. Clyde Fant, (in his book, Preaching For Today),<sup>3</sup> details this method and Bishop Gerald Kennedy was a master at it. It involves pacing about in one's study as the sermon is worked out word by word and phrase by phrase in the mind. The process still involves the outlining of the sermon, filling in that outline, and finally "rewriting" and polishing until the sermon is fixed to one's satisfaction.

Whatever one's method, the sermon still must be molded into an art-form, just as a painter works with canvas, a sculptor with granite, marble or whatever, and a musician with a score. The master homiletician Harry Emerson Fosdick could see it no other way: "I do not see how a man can preach without writing," he declared. "I always have thought with my pen in hand."<sup>4</sup>

The writing process helps one sort out and organize random thoughts, clarify what one really thinks, and develop one's ideas. Matthew Arnold condemned poetry which is no

---

<sup>3</sup>Clyde Fant, Preaching for Today (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 150 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Deane William Ferm, "The Living of These Days: A Tribute to Harry Emerson Fosdick," Christian Century, XCV (May 3, 1978), 30-33.

more than "a shower of isolated thoughts and images."<sup>5</sup> He would likewise probably condemn sermons that are no more than that. Like the painter or musician, the sermon writer must communicate his perceptions to an audience in an orderly manner, using, not paint or patterns of sound, but language. In other words, the sermon writer, like any other artist, must know as much as he can about the medium in which he works before he can develop real skill in conveying to a listener the beauty or significance that he has discovered in his subject. As R.E.C. Browne states "Preachers are not to be overconcerned with the results of their sermons; they are to give careful attention to all that makes the construction of sermons possible."<sup>6</sup>

### Length.

Somewhere in my reading I stumbled across a story about a South African tribe that has evolved a marvelous system for the regulation of speakers. It is perhaps worthy of widespread emulation. Their speakers are limited to what they can say while standing on one foot. As soon as the other foot touches the ground, that's the end of the speech.

---

<sup>5</sup>Lewis C. Day, The Poetic Image (London: Cape, 1947), p. 114.

<sup>6</sup>R.E.C. Browne, The Ministry of the Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 21.

Perhaps one of the few other ways to shorten sermons is to demand that they first be written out for the writing process is laborious and slow. But we are in the age of the short sermon and a short sermon, like an essay, is one of the most demanding and vital literary genres around. The saying, "excuse the long letter, I didn't have time to write a short one," especially applies to sermon writing.

The short sermon depends greatly on the preacher's selection of subject matter, his use of figures of speech and his command of words and sentence structure. Browne likens the short sermon to the poem. "Like the short poem, the short sermon must make its effects quickly and proportionately. Neither the poet nor the preacher may linger over one movement, each must dispense with every superfluous word."<sup>7</sup> The written-out sermon makes for such economy of words.

#### Revising and Polishing.

Catherine Drinker Bowen, the writer, paid a tribute to the help she received from the late Bernard De Voto. She recalled a remark of his concerning a manuscript she had sent with a request that he look it over. "The chapter will do," he wrote her. "But just run it through your typewriter again."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>8</sup>Norman Cousins, "Polishing the Script," Saturday Review (November 11, 1958), 22.

The written-out sermon allows for a rerun through the typewriter and permits the preacher to sandpaper the rough spots, delete redundant and unnecessary words, improve thoughts and logic before the sermon is preached. A New Yorker cartoon has a gangling teenage boy reciting Gertrude Stein's immortal line before his high school English class, "A rose is a...sort of like I mean a...you know...rose...is ...like...you...know...a rose...right?" Whatever mirth there may be in this absurdity people are capable of perpetrating with words there is the obvious point that something beautiful can be nullified by extraneous words. Sermons especially! We've all tried to listen to sermons rendered unbearable by preachers who never use one word when twenty will do, and believe that nothing succeeds like excess.

One of the theories of art is the elimination of excess -- that less is more. If a sermon is a literary artform, as we hold that it is, then it calls for a precision of expression and an economy of words. Some journalism schools start out students with the exercise of writing catalogue copy. It is an excellent exercise in that one must not only write tight copy because of the minimal space requirements, but also one must write powerfully enough to sell what is being described.

If there is one shortcoming common to the sermons heard on Sunday mornings it is that they haven't been

sufficiently revised and polished. Most seem to be first drafts and have all the professional punch of home movies.

Sermons can be polished by blue penciling words that no longer say anything, like the word "very." William Allen White, the famed editor of the Emporia, Kansas, Gazette, used to break his cub reporters of that word by having them substitute "damn" whenever they were tempted to use it. "Very pretty" or "very great" became "damn pretty" or "damn great." Proofreaders would, of course, delete the objectionable expletive and the reporters gradually got the point that something is either pretty or not pretty and "very" didn't add a thing.

Another extraneous word is "that." Why say, "the point of this text is that..." when all that needs to be said is "the point of this text is...?" Little deletions like this are small but still help to streamline a sermon, like taking pounds off a race car to make it go faster; every ounce helps.

There are more major deletions. Fosdick was a master at condensing anecdotal material to a few lines and retaining (even strengthening) its impact. He could also capsule biographical material in three sentences and make that person's life worth remembering.

In a small grocery store in Kernville, California, I found this scotch-taped to the cash register

The Lord's Prayer has 56 words; at Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke only 268 long-remembered words; and we got the whole country going on the 1,322 words in the Declaration of Independence. So how come it took the Federal Government 26,911 words to issue a regulation on the sale of cabbage?

When words are aerosoled out over a congregation they only create a fog, like the pseudo-precise diction of bureaucratese. A sermon that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line -- and in every word. Revision and polishing a written draft is the way to do that.

### Strengthening Copy.

The power of expression can also be achieved through re-thinking certain words and phrases. Davis cites an experience in the life of Keats to illustrate this. When Keats first wrote his opening line of Endymion: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever:" it was "A thing of beauty is a constant joy." Keats' roommate said the line was fine but lacked something. Only after pondering it a long time did Keats exclaim, "I have it!" and wrote the famous line as it now stands.<sup>9</sup>

Reworking a sermon manuscript for whatever necessary reason is, of course, not the most exciting part of a minister's work. As Sweazey put it so well:

---

<sup>9</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 5.

Just when the preacher wants to think his work is done, he has to start again. With the whole sermon before him, illogicalities in structure may be apparent. Wordings that are clumsy, complex, dull, and ungrammatical will be discovered. A first draft will always be too wordy; it must be run through the wringer until every dispensable word has been squeezed out. If the meaning would be as clear with any sentence or paragraph removed, it has to go. A lean style keeps hearers listening; wordiness gives gaps through which minds can slip out for their own wandering.<sup>10</sup>

Merrill Abbey compares revision to a pianist's gaining mastery over a composition, not by tripping through the whole score, but by drilling on phrases patiently repeated over and over.<sup>11</sup> In music, painting, sculpting, and writing the artistic piece isn't complete until the laborious changing and polishing is complete. A sermon that isn't subjected to this finishing work is of a piece with amateurism.

---

<sup>10</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 123.

<sup>11</sup>Abbey, p. 29.

## Chapter 3

## THE FORM OF THE WRITTEN SERMON

The form of the written sermon is close to that of an editorial, essay, or even a magazine or newspaper article. These all have been likened to the analogy of a train. First, the all-important introduction which acts like the prow of the locomotive (they used to be called "cow-catchers"), clearing the track, forcing its way into the hearer's attention, luring the listener into going on with the sermon. This should be striking, bright, and in the average sermon, it is an illustration or a provocative statement.

Second, the locomotive, the powerhouse of the train, corresponding in a sermon to a broad quick survey of what the sermon is going to cover -- yet still presented compactly, colorfully. This must immediately follow the introduction, and be connected with it by an imaginative transition. This would be a succinct statement of the central idea of the sermon.

Third, the string of cars. In wordage, these far outweigh all the rest, and form the bulk of the sermon. These are the illustrations, incidents, quotations, theological and exegetical points. They must be arranged logically and carefully in sequence, with one subject leading to another, by smooth transitions -- corresponding to the couplings between railroad cars. "Train of thought" is no



mere phrase. The sermon should be organized almost as carefully and logically as a debater organizes his argument, a lawyer his brief.

Fourth, the caboose, or conclusion. This rounds out the sermon. It can be an illustration, kick ending, an apt turn of phrase, a repetition of something already in the sermon, but with some kind of comment on it. But every sermon, as any literary piece, needs to come to a smooth stop, not a nerve-wracking, body-jolting halt.

This form may smack too much of the hackneyed homiletical approach of three points framed by introduction and conclusion and sprinkled with appropriate illustrations for each subpoint, but it must still be the basic form in order for a sermon to have an orderly presentation. Architecture is an art much like that of other artforms. A limitless variety of styles is possible, but the design must fit the function. "Form follows function," is the architectural rule. An architect can have great freedom of expression, but if he is too independent of blueprints and engineering, his building will fall down. So, too, with the sermon; it will not stand up without a functional form. As George Sweazey writes:

A sermon is like an editorial, a speech to the Senate, or a football coach's pregame exhortation -- it has a function and it must be carefully designed for just this purpose. It is to inform, to elevate, to reprove, to incite, to open a way for the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Sweazey further develops this point by asking the question: If preaching is an art, can there not be free-form sermons? And in answering it by saying that

Contemporary arts are trying to escape from pattern and rational design. There is nonrepresentational painting, abstract sculpture, poetry beyond meaning, and music that is nonrhythmic and atonal. If there can be a theatre of the absurd, should there not be a pulpit of the absurd? Some ministers have found a good deal of satisfaction in an awareness-evoking style of preaching that transcends the ordinary limits of reason and speech. It has attracted some attention, but not many hearers.<sup>2</sup>

Ever since Aristotle said "Beauty depends on order," this has been a maxim for speakers. Order simply means "rightness;" it is the opposite of messiness. It means that everything in the speech or sermon is exactly where it is, not by accident, but for good reason. It has true form.

While it can be argued that even disorganized sermons have a form, as Davis does in his analogy of a brushpile: "A brushpile is a mass of unrelated dead branches -- like some sermons -- but it is not a shapeless mass. The brushpile has a form that can be measured, drawn, painted."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 2.

Kind of like the wag who said that every sermon has a beginning, a middle, and an ending, but not necessarily in that order. But the brushpile-type sermon is a form of disorder and we are speaking of sermons that need forms of order. We would agree with Davis that there is no ideal or standard form which every sermon must take. He puts it this way:

The sermon is not a species with fixed and invariable characteristics, as the form of the violet, the lily, the leaf of the red oak, and twig of the weeping willow is fixed. There is no pre-existent mold into which the substance of thought must be poured in order to make a sermon.<sup>4</sup>

The functional form needed for a sermon is the form taken to better accomplish the purpose of the writer. It is that form, as Davis puts it, "which almost automatically results from the intention to accomplish a given purpose."<sup>5</sup> It is whatever form is required to get the preacher's message across so that the listener feels satisfied that what was intended came across just as the sermon composer must have wanted it to come across. In this sense, it would square with any art-form. The form fulfills the function of the artist. If it can be accomplished with the standard three-point homiletical approach, fine; if not, the most suitable form must be discovered and employed. The form

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

follows the function.

Besides structural form, there is communication form. Basically, there are four forms of communication; exposition, narration, description, or argumentation (including persuasion).<sup>6</sup> While traditionally the preacher dwells mostly in logical argument and persuasion, all forms of communication are suitable to the sermon and should be employed according to the material used. Artistic writing depends partly upon the author's being able to use deliberately whichever techniques will do the job best, with the least chance of misunderstanding. Here again, the form of communication follows function, just as it does in the structure of the sermon.

The sermon writer should not worry too much about form at the beginning stage of composing a sermon. A rough sketch of an outline is in order, just as an architect draws a rendering, but the finished form cannot be truly envisioned at the start of the sermon idea. The form develops as the sermon develops. This is true of both the structural form and the communication form.

The major hurdle to overcome in sermon writing, as in just about any creative undertaking, is just getting started. Instead of concentrating on what to do first, one tends to dwell on the task as a whole, that is, the entire

---

<sup>6</sup>Randall E. Decker, Patterns of Exposition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), p. v.

form of the sermon. This overwhelms the writer by the seeming magnitude of the assignment. The solution is to forget the end form, not even try to envision it, and to decide what needs to be done first and to do that with little thought for the rest of the task. Perspective should be maintained on the sermon as a whole, but one step should be taken at a time.

There are two ways to proceed on establishing the form of the sermon. The first procedure is to spread out one's notes, after the research has been completed, and then arrange the notes into logical sequence. This will make the beginning of the outline form.

The second procedure, again after the reading and research is complete, is to just start writing the first draft from beginning to end, with little or no stopping for editing. In writing the first draft, maintaining a flow of ideas is more important than choosing exact words. If one feels the need for an appropriate quotation or illustration, a space should be left, along with a note of what is needed, and then one should keep on writing. The form develops as the text is written. The form will change slightly with the revision of the first draft, but the basic structure will be developed through the setting down of the first draft.

The form of any sermon will have the basic beginning, middle, and end, just like any piece of literary art. The thing to avoid, however, is in getting into a form rut.

Like the girl who complained that a young minister's proposal of marriage to her had an introduction, three main points, and a conclusion.<sup>7</sup> True, any artist has a style; one can readily recognize music by Mozart or a painting by Picasso, but the creative person varies the form. So must the preacher.

There is a right form for every sermon, namely, the form that is right for this particular sermon, Davis maintains.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to state that

right form can never be imposed on any sermon. If it has to be imposed it is not right. The right form derives from the substance of the message itself, is inseparable from the content, becomes one with the content, and gives a feeling of finality to the sermon.<sup>9</sup>

That is form manipulation and reminds one of the story Sweazey includes in his book of the minister who said "I've got three dandy illustrations, and I am looking for a good text."<sup>10</sup> That is a case of the tail wagging the dog.

A final word on form is that it is always secondary to content. If the sermon writer devotes too much time to form and too little to content, if he studies the use of form as something apart from content, he may become a

---

<sup>7</sup>Sweazey, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup>Davis, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Sweazey, p. 71.

rhetorician, an attractive writer and speaker, but he will turn out to be something less than a preacher of the gospel.. The form is merely the shape upon which the garment of truth is draped.

## Chapter 4

## PREPARATION FOR WRITING

Introduction.

Writing sermons is not a primary biological urge. In point of fact, it is devilishly hard work. All the evidence indicates that even the most accomplished homiletics find their task a hard one, no matter how many years they have been at it. Fosdick spent hours, even days, just brooding before he began to write. He spoke of "being glued to a hard chair for hours, going through the agony of searching for words."<sup>1</sup> It is the old formula of 99 per cent perspiration and one per cent inspiration.

An artist interviewed in Saturday Review magazine used a phrase which others have put in similar terms. An artist, he said, is a person "who is willing to be ruthless with himself."<sup>2</sup> Frank Sinatra once said something similar. Back in the days when he trained for singing much like a boxer in training, expanding the capacity of his lungs by swimming and running, developing to the point where with one breath he could take in almost 40 per cent more air than the

---

<sup>1</sup>Halford Luccock, In the Minister's Workshop (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 141.

<sup>2</sup>Carlos DeGrazio, "Profile of An Artist," Saturday Review (May 1976) 44-47.



average person, he said: "I knew I would be just another romantic singer added to a faceless lot if I didn't get mean with myself."<sup>3</sup>

Robert Frost called it "the pain of poetry." It is also the pain of preaching. There is no easy way to write sermons. There is no certain formula, no short cut, no bag of tricks. It is not a matter of memorizing rules or of acquiring skills. It is basically a matter of approaching the task with a disciplined routine.

By disciplined routine is meant a fixed, regular work schedule, a willingness to engage in a routine of toil by the clock, starting at the same hour and ending at the same hour, day after wearisome day. Stopping at a set time is as important as starting punctually. Writing sermons, to the astonishment of some when they first begin to try it, requires tremendous physical as well as mental exertion. Most reasonably healthy persons can exert themselves for three to six hours, but when forced beyond that span, show clear symptoms of fatigue. The attention span shortens; memory lags; muscular coordination is off; errors mount. It's time to stop for recreation, relaxation, or some other ministerial task.

A good sermonizer must also be ruthless about the

---

<sup>3</sup>Book review of "Sinatra, the Man," New York Review of Books (October 1960), 12.

place where he works. A study and an office are two different places. You may have to retreat to your home or to a remote cavern in the church, but find some place and put all your writing equipment, reference books, notes, etc., in it, and regard it as a sacred place. It is your private, holy place. Keep out all intruders. Erect "Off Limits" signs -- literally, if necessary. Keep out children, mate, friends, custodians. At the appointed hour, be there in your "place," then get to work. Speak to no one and allow no one to speak to you. Adjust your appetite and your personal habits so that you have no possible excuse to leave your "place" until the time is up. You will be surprised at what you will be able to accomplish. Samuel Johnson said, "A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it."<sup>4</sup> It's just a matter of getting mean with yourself.

When the best time for writing sermons may be varies with the preacher, but generally the morning hours are best, because the mind is fresher after the night's rest. Bishop Gerald Kennedy, recognized for his preaching skill, realized that the earlier the start the better if he was going to rise to the top of his profession. He wrote:

In the early days of my ministry I began going down to my office at 6:00 A.M. I met another fellow nearly every morning at the corner of the church, and finally

---

<sup>4</sup>"Boswell's Johnson." New York Review of Books (February 1975), 16.

we began to talk together for a few moments. I found he was a young lawyer who had the ambition to be the best lawyer in the state of California. I wanted to be the best preacher in the nation, and we were both going to our offices early to prepare ourselves to become the best members of our profession.<sup>5</sup>

Some people are "night" persons and do their creative best then, after the responsibilities and routine tasks of the day are behind them. The thing mitigating against night work for the pastor is the schedule of meetings, unless he or she can still work late after the meetings. Some say they can, and more power to them. For most, however, the morning hours are best for sermon writing.

### The Effort for Writing.

While writing sermons can be pleasant and stimulating, yet it is also a lot of plain old drudgery. Van Wyck Brooks, discussing his own methods of writing, said: "There is nothing more discouraging than to face a blank sheet of paper at the start of a day's work."<sup>6</sup> Every preacher faces this when faced with the task each week of coming up with a sermon and it takes a monumental effort to drive the intellect along the academic track anew each week. Thomas Carlyle, the Scotch essayist, is said to have once

---

<sup>5</sup>Gerald Kennedy, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 130.

<sup>6</sup>New York Times Book Review (October 6, 1940).

remarked: "When I sit down to write, there is not an idea discernable in the heart of me...just one dull cloud of stupidity. It is only with an effort like swimming for life that I can begin to think at all."

"A boss of mine once gave me a book on how to write a novel," television reporter Celestine Sibley says. "In the front he wrote these wise words: 'You may find this book useful; it cannot, however, use the typewriter.'" <sup>7</sup> Getting to the typewriter in itself takes effort. Budd Schulberg was asked how he began his writing and he explained:

First I clean the typewriter. Then I go through my shelves and return all borrowed books. Then I play with my children. Then I find some friends to have a drink <sup>8</sup> with. By then it's time to clean the typewriter again.

Though this was written in humor, it is a fairly good description of the pain of effort in just getting at the task of writing anything, sermons included.

Once at the typewriter a second effort is needed to actually get words on paper. Like Schulberg procrastinating over getting to his typewriter, the sermon writer can also find excuses galore to avoid the effort of writing. Fred Craddock lists some of them

---

<sup>7</sup>"Points to Ponder," Reader's Digest (October 1973)

<sup>8</sup>W. E. Sangster, The Kingdom of God (London: S.P.C.K. 1966), p. 210.

I feel, then, the burden to work unceasingly at how to communicate. This burden is not laid on me simply by the practical concern to remain employed (a benefit not unwelcomed) but by the nature of the gospel and of the call to effect a hearing of that gospel. All attempts to rid myself of this burden -- I never had a way with words; a person should not be fancy with the truth; style is for novelists and poets, but I am a preacher; I just tell it like it is, and if they miss it, that is their problem -- have been quite unsuccessful.... The way to begin, for all of us, is to recognize and to accept the complexity and the difficulty of communicating. We read a book by an author for whom it seems so effortless; we hear a lecturer or preacher who seems to float along on natural gifts. We ask "how?" and they all speak of work, work, work. Some flashes, to be sure, but usually working without ecstasy.<sup>9</sup>

Davis also speaks to this need for effort:

In some highly gifted men such a mastery of form seems like second nature. They seem never to have to pay any attention to it. In such cases appearances may be deceptive. We must remember that these fortunate creatures have an equal facility of thought. They seem not to struggle with anything. At any rate, a mastery of form does not come to most men without study, much practice, long and patient effort. And even the gifted man does not produce any great work, nor any considerable body of respectable work, without sustained and concentrated application. Many a man with brilliant talent fails to produce anything; he lacks the character to make the required effort.<sup>10</sup>

Lack of effort is always apparent in the finished product. Speaking of preachers who take pride in how fast they can put a sermon together, Phillips Brooks wrote, "They tell you in how short a time they write their sermons, and when you hear them preach you only wonder that it took so

---

<sup>9</sup>Fred Craddock, Overhearing the Gospel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 10.

long."<sup>11</sup> Andrew Blackwood flatly states that, "the sermon which comes without effort is sometimes worth only what it costs. The hearer is likely to remember it as long afterwards as the preacher has been thinking about the subject before."<sup>12</sup> Samuel Johnson noted that "what is written without effort is in general read with pleasure."<sup>13</sup>

Putting forth the effort to write sermons is especially difficult for preachers with the gift of facile expression, "a gift of gab" as it is commonly known. Listening to such sermons, Sweazey puts it, is like "eating cotton candy."<sup>14</sup> Sweazey quotes the poet, Racine, who wrote to a critic for advice, saying "I ought to tell you that I write with great facility." To which the critic answered, "I hope to teach you to write with great difficulty."<sup>15</sup> Sweazey then comments:

A natural gift for unreflected expression is a dangerous one. A minister who counts on it will always miss doing what he might have done. Natural fluency has been the ruination of many preachers; they love to talk and do it easily, charmingly, even brilliantly, so they come to

---

<sup>11</sup>Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1958), p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup>Andrew W. Blackwood, The Fine Art of Preaching (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup>"Boswell's Johnson," p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 105.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

rely on this instead of on hard work. The result is that their sermons become flashy and empty.<sup>16</sup>

Writing is for the most part laborious and slow. The mind travels faster than the pen and it takes disciplined effort to capture the fleeting thoughts of the mind and get them on paper. "Writing is a wretched process," says author John McPhee.<sup>17</sup> "Forget the magic words 'mood' 'inspiration,' he says. "Set up a daily writing routine and stick with it. Get into the harness. Until you do, your work won't be consistently effective."

Hard-pressed preachers may fall back on the hope that it is God who makes any sermon a success. An old German pastor gave Martin Niemoller his experience with this "I count on the Holy Ghost, but the only time he ever spoke to me in the pulpit he said, 'Heinrich, you're lazy.'"<sup>18</sup>

A sermon is an act of oral communication. And yet it must be carefully prepared, planned not alone in its general outline but as regards its very language. This takes effort, time, and the discipline to get at it week in and week out. Pascal once said that most of the disorders and evils in life are the result of man's inability to sit still and think.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>"A Talk With John McPhee," Christian Science Monitor (August 31, 1978)

<sup>18</sup>Sweazey, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Cousins, "Editorial," Saturday Review (April 15, 1978), 11.

Not much time is freely available to today's minister to sit still and think. The proliferation of tasks has squeezed virtually to the vanishing point blocks of time free from interruption, time essential for sermon preparation and especially for long-range reading and reflection. This has resulted in the homiletical desert that now exists. It will only change when the primacy of preaching is rediscovered and the disciplined effort is made to prepare sermons as they should be prepared. "Great preaching, like great art, cannot be the work of those who know no chaos within them and it cannot be the work of those who are unable to master the chaos within them."<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>R.E.C. Browne, The Ministry of the Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 17.



## Chapter 5

## THE SERMON IDEA

The aphorism, "Some speak because they have something to say while others speak because they have to say something," might have been composed with the preacher in mind. Week after week the preacher must appear before his congregation to preach. Life being what it is, the preacher does not ascent the pulpit each time with the same high level of emotional stimulation and mental preparation. There are times, to be sure, when everything is right. The preacher has left no aspect of preparation undone. He has something to say and he is constrained to say it. But there are also days when even the most earnest preachers have their dry spells. The sabbath appearance during such times is a struggle for the preacher and a burden for the congregation. "The preacher has to say something." He is constrained by the occasion.

If one were to pinpoint the reason for the enthusiasm or lack of it on these two types of occasions it would basically have to do with the sermon idea. Successful sermons, those when the preacher "has something to say," spring from a valid, important, serious idea. When the preacher has nothing or little to say, it is probably because there wasn't a sound sermon idea upon which to construct a sermon. Every successful sermon must be founded upon a big idea or

on what some homileticians term the "ah ah!"

Back in my embryonic days of preaching, when I was perplexed as to why many of my sermons were so pedestrian, it gradually came to me that the ones that succeeded, however, modestly, were those that had an "ah ha," a sound sermon idea. Experience revealed that a sermon was doomed from the start if it wasn't built on a good idea, regardless of how brilliantly constructed and cleverly illustrated. For the "ah ha," or "big idea" is what captures listeners, holds them, and involves them.

#### The Source of Sermon Ideas.

Good sermon ideas don't come easily or readily. Once in a while one will fall in the preacher's lap, but usually they are dragged screaming out of a Biblical text or a life situation or a current event or any number of specific items occupying one's life-experience horizon.

The Bible, it almost goes without saying, is the primary source of sermon ideas for the sermon is always based on a biblical text. Sermons have a connection with the Bible which they have with no other book. For the Bible is the book of that religious community whose organ the preacher is. The Bible is the preacher for preachers. True, sermons are supported by material from other books, i.e. Tennyson, Browning, Shakespeare, and even a bit of Hemingway or John Updike now and then.

Sermons may also extract religious relevancy from modern art or from social phenomena to lay themselves alongside the modern mind. But they will be obliged to come back to the Bible for their charter, if they remain evangelical at all.<sup>1</sup>

Preachers more and more are having their consciousness raised to this awareness. Those sermons that have a certain energy to them are those in which the preacher has plunged into the scriptural sea and come up with hidden treasure. The good sermon ideas are there, but they must be sought out.

But the preacher must know the Bible more than just in the way of business, as a sermon quarry. If not, the sermon tumbles into one of two extremes: 1) textual literalism; which reduces the religious demand upon human life to the simple routine of phrase and precept, and whose monotony bores listeners altogether or 2) topical variety; a more exciting and enlivening type of preaching because of strong human interest content, but one that softens the Biblical message and makes it ineffectual.

Sermons, even in strictly conservative churches, are swinging away from the dull and defensive declamations of textual literalism, but all too often the pendulum swings too far. Sermons become "after-dinner" talks that rely more heavily on joke books and The Reader's Digest than the Bible

---

<sup>1</sup>H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 66.

for content. They do diminish boredom, but ultimately they are as ineffective in presenting God's truth as the drab pedagogical sermons of old. In a popular Noel Coward song there is a line that says, "I merely have the talent to amuse." Topical sermons not structured from Scripture have little more oomph than to do that. They become excursions into egoism, subjectivity, and surface insights.

What we have in the Bible is a body of inspired literature in which, with the single exception of the first century B.C., experts find original compositions of every century, from the thirteenth or twelfth century B.C. to the first or second century A.D. The sources of ideas in the biblical writings are seemingly infinite. All the major themes of life are there; they must be mined by the preacher. As Horace Bushnell said, "The Bible is a gift to the imagination."<sup>2</sup>

Reading is perhaps the preacher's greatest source of sermon ideas, other than the Bible. Exposure to the printed ideas of great minds is an inestimable resource of sermon ideas. Bishop Kennedy ranked reading as his source of sermon ideas and went on to make the judgment that:

The preachers who make their mark on a generation are persons who read widely and wisely. The preacher's convictions are not the result of narrowness or ignorance. These preachers have ranged widely in their intellectual pursuits so that their ideas are big and their faith is

---

<sup>2</sup>Halford Luccock, Communicating the Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 220.

broad. Hand-to-mouth preachers are soon recognized and no surface brilliance can cover up the lack of intellectual preparation. I know of no exceptions to the general proposition that good preachers are great readers.<sup>3</sup>

A preacher must read a great deal, Sweazey says, because "anyone who gives much mentally and spiritually must get much, and reading is the best channel from the hearts and minds of others."<sup>4</sup>

The good ideas come from good reading -- the classics, the great works of recognized thinkers, the books, as some unknown wag once quipped, that "are too good to become best sellers." "Junk-food reading," yields little in the way of ideas, because there are no nutrient ideas there. The same for popular reading found in newspapers and magazines. They should be looked at by the preacher because some germinal ideas for contemporary sermons may be there, but much time can be consumed on material that has no substantive ideas for the sermon writer. George Buttrick once said that he always reads newspapers standing up because his legs get tired.<sup>5</sup> Murders, holdups, scandals, and fires become redundant; reading of more of them ceases to add to one's understanding.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Gerald Kennedy, "Guest Preacher Column," Pulpit Resource, V, 2 (1977), 13.

<sup>4</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 179.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

A word should be said about appropriating the ideas found in reading and the proper borrowing of ideas. Aesop has a fable about a crow who disguises itself in peacock feathers in the hope of being received among the more magnificent birds, but is promptly "denuded of his stolen colors" by their owners, and driven forth, an object of scorn. This fable is often used in discussions of plagiarism. And it fits if one is talking about rank cribbing of material, the servile copying of another's work. It is wrong, both legally and morally, to steal another's creation to the damage of the creator. That is literary piracy. There is, however, an area of legitimate borrowing and imitating that is not only legally and morally acceptable, but should even be encouraged. This is the practice spoken of: one takes the lead from what someone else has thought up and makes it one's own, by reinterpreting the borrowed matter, and by improving upon it.

There are models for this type of borrowing. Virgil borrowed from Homer and unabashedly said, "the fruit of reading is to emulate what one finds good in others, and by suitable adaptation to convert what one most admires in others to one's own use."<sup>7</sup> John Donne took material from Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. Darwin frankly admitted that

---

<sup>7</sup>J. N. Paull, Literary Ethics (London: Massey, 1944), p. 154.

he built his Theory of Natural Selection on the ideas of Malthus. Shakespeare got almost all his story ideas from previous tales and the derivation of many of his famous phrases are found in sayings of others. In fact, all of English literature was in its flower when its literary giants consciously imitated one another.<sup>8</sup>

For that matter most of the concepts Jesus taught can be found in the Old Testament. He built upon them. "You have heard it said, but I say..." (Matthew 5:21) He took something good and gave it new vitality. All of life evolves in this way. Scientists build on the work of predecessors. Even in sports it's true. Baseball and football are not original American games as many suppose. Baseball was adopted from the English sport of "rounders," and football came from rugby.

To show how this highest form of reinterpretation -- really transformation -- is brought about, classical writers commonly resort to figures, the favorite being that of the bee. As it transforms the nectars of the most varied flowers into honey, so the sermon writer should so blend whatever he or she has gathered from a varied course of reading into one delicious compound. Digestion is another favorite figure. Undigested -- that is, merely memorized or copied -- material

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

got from reading can no more be transformed into an original work than undigested food can build up the body.

Imitation and borrowing in this manner is encouraged as long as individual originality be shown by choosing and using models carefully, by reinterpreting borrowed matter, and by improving on those models and that matter. As Pierre Bayle wrote back in the Seventeenth Century: "There is no less wit nor invention in applying rightly a thought one finds in a book than in being the first author of that thought."<sup>9</sup>

Keeping a journal is another way of getting sermon ideas and developing raw material for sermons. The entries in a journal may range all the way from brief accounts of conversations and descriptions of personal experience, to comments on reading, lectures, and works of art, to statements of ideas for further thought and development. All these may serve as hints for later expansion and combination. The freshness of our experiences soon fades and we lose the vividness of our impressions as the details that produced the impression gradually slip away from us. By keeping a journal the sermon writer is able to retain these details and have them available for later use. Often ideas come to the sermon writer at inconvenient and unlikely times, and if

---

<sup>9</sup>Pierre Bayle, "Wraparound," Harper's, LXXXVIII, 10 (June 1972), 97.



one does not record the idea when it comes, it may be lost forever. Many a preacher has awakened in the morning to a vague recollection that he had a "good idea" just before he went to sleep. A small notebook by the bedside would have enabled him to keep that idea rather than let it slip away over the night.

Most professional writers keep journals in which they note not only ideas, but also well-turned phrases, interesting words, and even questions worth pursuing. One of the most famous journal keepers was Thoreau, who wrote in one of his journals:

To set down such choice experiences that my own writings may inspire me and at last I may make wholes of parts. Certainly it is a distinct profession to rescue from oblivion and to fix the sentiments and thoughts which visit all men more or less generally, that the contemplation of the unfinished picture may suggest its harmonious completion. Associate reverently and as much as you can with your loftiest thoughts. Each thought that is welcomed and recorded is a nest egg, by the side of which more will be laid. Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed and exhibited. Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing, of keeping a journal -- that so we remember our best hours and stimulate ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

Thoreau suggests perhaps the most important reason for journal keeping for a sermon writer: "Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed."<sup>11</sup> Thought begets thought and a journal keeps

---

<sup>10</sup>Henry Thoreau, The Heart of Thoreau's Journals (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

before us the first thoughts needed, oftentimes, for a sermon.

Novelist C. P. Snow speaks of novelists always having a mental "tape recorder" going, recording mentally every person who enters the living room of their lives in order to get characters for their novels.<sup>12</sup> The successful sermon writer has a similar tape recorder going, not so much for characters but for ideas.

### Developing the Idea.

From the various sources of sermon ideas, the sermon writer must still pull together the basic idea -- the "ah ha!"

One of the commonest ways to do this is just to start writing -- or jotting is perhaps the better word -- the random thoughts that come to mind around that idea. "There is nothing like touching a piece of paper with a pen for making a reluctant mind surrender," George Sweazey says.<sup>13</sup> Ralph Sockman said that it is when we start writing that the ideas start.<sup>14</sup> What is written first, before the mind is really ready, may have to be done over, but it gets things going. Often the first obstacle to be removed in sermon

---

<sup>12</sup>Louise Sweeney, "C.P. Snow: Secrets of Writing a Novel," Christian Science Monitor (January 3, 1979).

<sup>13</sup>Sweazey, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

writing is the mistaken notion that a good sermon writer is one who can write a sermon straight out, beginning with the title and working right through to the final sentence. Even the idea, which preceeds the sermon, must be written out over and over again.

One preacher puts his struggle in these words:

I have found it helpful to follow this format in sermon preparation: writing down the theme or topic, associating to the topic on paper using words and phrases that come to mind, organizing the idea into roughly the traditional three-point format. Then, I ask myself: "How do my thoughts and phrases relate to my current struggles and conflicts? What kind of unfinished inner life or inter-personal business am I reflecting in the sermon? Would this business better be dealt with as a therapeutic issue or on a one-to-one basis with a significant other in my life? What effect do my insights now have on the sermon idea? Do I need to pick a new idea?"<sup>15</sup>

Another way of formulating the idea is to talk it out rather than write it out. Kennedy quotes the preacher-writer Barrett Wendell on this who states the method in these words:

My method of clearing my ideas is by no means the only one. I have known people who could do it best by talking; by putting somebody else in a comfortable chair and making him listen to their efforts to discover what they really think. I have known others who could really do best by sitting still and pondering in apparent idleness; others who could do best by walking alone in the open air; others, by stating to themselves the problems they wish to solve, and then going about all manner of business, trusting from experience, to something they

---

<sup>15</sup>Marvin A. Gardner, Jr., "The Word Within," College of Preachers Newsletter (January 1976), 3.

call unconscious cerebration. Each man, I take it, must find his own method; at different times each man may find different methods the best.<sup>16</sup>

Another method is to try and get a different perspective on a familiar idea or problem. A teacher of writing at the University of California, Irvine, asks her students to bend over, legs apart, hands on knees. She then instructs them to hold that position -- a position which, if you look backward through your legs, offers you a very different view of the world -- and describe what they see. A silly exercise? Perhaps. But the teacher and her students don't think so. For them it helps prove a point: If you're willing to take a different look at an old problem, you may come up with a brand new solution.<sup>17</sup>

Another approach to crystallizing the sermon idea is to back off from it once one has saturated the mind with data and allow the data to rumble about in the psyche...let it incubate. It is that time a writer was referring to when asked by his editor how a certain assignment was coming and he tapped the side of his head and said, "The boys in the back room are working on it."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Gerald Kennedy, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup>Shearlean Duke, "To Teach Writing," Los Angeles Times (April 30, 1977), View Section, p. 9-11.

<sup>18</sup>E. B. White, Letters of E. B. White (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1969), p. 159.

As the material marinates in the mind it should eventually bring forth an "ah ha!" It may come when one is most relaxed. It is that flash of insight that sent Archimedes hopping out of his tub and running down the street shouting, "Eureka!"

The best ideas come from deep within the preacher. Whatever sources are employed, reading, journal notes, etc., these but trigger something within the soul of the sermon writer and help to bring the idea to the surface of consciousness. A group of writers a few years ago were having dinner with Theodore White and one of them asked the noted author what it took to write a great book. They thought he would say something facile -- the breaks of the game, a good title, a publisher who cared, the right timing. Instead White, whose own first book was a passionate account of his days as a journalist in a collapsing China, said something that stayed with at least one of those writers since: "Something that is deep in you, that burns your gut, and you simply have to get out of you."<sup>19</sup> The poet Robert Frost once said something similar. While sitting for a portrait bust by sculptor Joe Brown, one of Brown's students asked Frost: "How do you go about writing a poem?" Frost answered, "Well, first, something has to happen to you."

---

<sup>19</sup>David Halberstram, "Winners and Losers," Los Angeles Times Book Review (January 9, 1977), 1.

Noting that the message didn't sink in, the poet continued:  
"Then you put some words on a piece of paper and ride them  
like a horse until you have a poem."<sup>20</sup>

The time spent in the early stages to discover the  
"ah ha!" helps the sermon writer focus and shape whatever  
the sermon is to be about. Once the writer sees things  
clearly, the listeners will too. What the sermon writer  
is doing is applying the same kind of common sense to his  
work that an architect uses in designing a building or an  
engineer uses in planning a bridge.

"This is the eternal origin of art," wrote Martin  
Buber, "that a human being confronts a form that wants to  
become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but  
something that appears to the soul and demands the soul's  
creative power."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Edward M. Black, Robert Frost: The Later Years  
(New York: Random House, 1973), p. 255.

<sup>21</sup>Walter Kaufman, "I and You: A Prologue," in  
Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970),  
p. 60.

## Chapter 6

## THE WRITING OF THE SERMON

The Model Sermon.

Perhaps the best way to present what goes into the composition and writing of a good sermon is to present a model and then analyze it from the standpoint as to why it is properly composed and written. The model herewith presented is a sermon by Ernest T. Campbell while he was pastor of The Riverside Church, New York City, in 1959.<sup>1</sup> The sermon is not only a sample of his style, but also is typical of the homiletical excellence he brought to that prestigious pulpit. I have taken the liberty, with his permission, to shorten and revise it.

"AFRAID TO BE FREE"  
by Ernest T. Campbell

Text: "...make me as one of thy hired servants." Luke 15:19b. (KJV)

Herman Melville once observed that "to produce a mighty book you must have a mighty theme." The power of the parable of the Prodigal Son rises from the majesty of the theme to which it speaks. This story has a way of "finding" us in our teens, in our 40s, in our 50s. Some of its terms have passed over into our language -- "elder brother," "fatted calf," "far country." Its yield of truth seems inexhaustible.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ernest T. Campbell, "Afraid to be Free," Pulpit Resource, V, 1 (1977), 10.

The hero of this parable is the waiting father, not the wandering son. Jesus gave us the story not to illustrate man's sin but to underscore God's love. The prodigal is not the hero, but one of his lines gives us our text.

The younger of two brothers asks somewhat rudely for his share of the inheritance. With these funds in hand he takes off for the far country and has himself a time. Presently his funds run out and, simultaneously, his friends. He begins to be in want. In the depths he comes to himself and decides to return home. One can hear him as he begins to rehearse his penitential speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants."

The lad's words are psychologically sound. Having once blown his freedom, he is now afraid of it. Apparently the father had offered no resistance to the boy's desire to leave home; there is in the narrative no record that he had chided him in any way, or warned him, or suggested that he stick around long enough to finish school or learn a trade. Now the son is frightened by his freedom. Faced with the burden of resumption, he desires to turn over his freedom as a son in order to enjoy the security of a slave. Now he mistrusts his abilities and doubts his capacities. "Make me as one of your hired servants." Tell me which field to work. Tell me what friends to make. Tell me how to manage my money. Here is a classic instance of a man afraid to be free. This is one of the oldest themes of the human story: Here is my freedom -- give me now my bread!

This truth helps us to understand, at least in part, the history of our race. We ask in dismay how tyrant after tyrant could come to control so many people at so many points in history. The answer is simple. The masses are afraid to be free. The Hebrews in the wilderness began to long for the securities of Egypt, and those longings almost achieved what Pharaoh's forces could not. Eric Hoffer, the peerless sage of the San Francisco piers, writes (in The True Believer) that unless a man has the talents to "make something" of himself, he will find freedom irksome. Hoffer points out that it was no sheet hypocrisy for the rank-and-file Nazis to declare that they were not guilty of the enormities charged against them: "They considered themselves cheated and maligned when made to shoulder responsibility for obeying orders. Had they not joined the Nazi movement in order to be free from responsibility?" Dostoevsky says the same thing in The Grand Inquisitor: "I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born."



It will be a dark day in the United States when we make the final turnover to Big Government. Conservatives who voice that warning display a sound instinct, although they frequently cite the wrong reasons for doing so.

If it be true that we are forever in danger of surrendering our freedom in exchange for bread, then surely we can find some good words to say on behalf of the dissenters in our society, those who are trying to see to it that no one form of thought should suit us all. The school strike that last year hung over New York City like a heavy, unwelcome fog, presented us with a sore and vexing problem, had at least this much to be said for it: There was one community in our large metropolis that wishes to have a say in the education of its young.

"...no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me one of thy hired servants." We must always resist the urge to lay down our freedom.

Occasionally when some ne'er-do-well is drafted by the army his "friends" can be heard saying, "The army will do him good." They mean, of course, that the command system of the military will have a salutary effect on him. Jesus was encountered one day by a centurion who embodies the command system. Said the officer in all candor: "I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one 'Go,' and he goeth; and to another, 'come,' and he cometh..." (Luke 7:8). It is easy for one to come to depend on such defining directives. They release us from the need to think for ourselves.

Anyone's work can take on this domination. I understood well the student from the University of Michigan in my office that day who said, "I think my father would die if he didn't have his work." Vance Packard and a host of others have told us about the growing totalitarian demands that large industry makes upon its employees. For want of a better term I call it "corporation absorption." One doesn't so much work for I.B.M. or General Motors; one belongs to I.B.M. or General Motors. They tell us where to live, what style of dress is acceptable, what kind of car to drive, what friendships we should form. Even back in Charles Lamb's time this tendency for one's work to define and dominate a man's life was present. In one of his essays Lamb wrote: "Besides my daylight servitude, I served over again all night in my sleep, and would awake with terrors of imaginary false entries; errors in my accounts, and the like. I was 50 years of age, and no prospect of emancipation presented itself. I had grown to my desk, as it were; and the wood had entered into my soul."

Everyone's work can take on this domination, even a minister's work. One of the most honest and searching books on the ministry I have seen in recent years is A Ministry Renewed, by Gordon Harris. In this volume the author confesses: "I found that I was evading the real issue of the Gospel, insofar as I was afraid, as I still am in many ways, to die to other people's expectations of me. The unwillingness to die in this sense precluded any real possibility of discovering my identity as a person in my own right, and thus any possibility of fulfilling my vocation as a minister, which is to teach others how to die."

There is a locked-up potential in us all that frequently remains locked up tight because we have sold our freedom as sons for the security of the system. This is why every so often we applaud -- if not openly at least within our own hearts -- the prima donna who can walk off the stage of the Met showing a flourish of independence; a Bo Belinsky, who can walk out of a baseball training camp in Florida, saying: "Who's gonna' tell me what time to go to bed at night?", a young congressman who begins to think independently on Vietnam and causes a fluttering in the political dovecote. This is why Benjamin Braddock in Charles Webb's The Graduate almost unhinges us: in a vivid and dramatic way he shows us the price we have paid for what the system has given us.

"But we have to eat," you say. Yes, but not cake. We must learn to simplify our desires, put some limits on our cupidity, so that we will want nothing so badly from the system that we will forget our freedom to achieve it.

"I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." These words have something to say about the nature of religious experience. The boy rehearsed these lines, but he never got to say them. His father wouldn't let him. Instead, he put a robe on his back (a symbol of distinction in the East); a ring on his finger (a mark of authority); shoes on his feet, so that he wouldn't have to run around bare of foot like a common slave. The father might have been forgiven a few "I-told-you-so's," but he did not indulge. He simply received the boy back and surrounded him with his supporting love. Thus the father becomes the beloved symbol of God's pursuing, nonstop, shatter-proof love for the world: God, "whose property is always to have mercy," as an old prayer puts it. There is a divine restraint at work; God will not crush out our freedom, even to take us captive.

But we're always tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that might come to us from an infallible book, an infallible

church, an infallible tradition, an infallible set of principles. Martin Luther was disturbed that the church of his time had interposed itself between man and God. He went on to write that "no man can die for another, and no man can believe for another." In the life of faith there may be guides, but there can be no proxies. There is no institution, there is no minister, there is no tradition, there is no theological system that can take the risk out of commitment for any one of us. God wants us back, to be sure, but not as self-deprecating, groveling, sniveling human beings. Penitent, yes; but as sons who are willing to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free" (Galatians 5:1). He has made us privy to his purposes. Said Jesus: "Henceforth I call you not servants ...but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). St. Paul comes at the same truth from a different runway when he says, "Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, 'Abba,' Father (Romans 8:15).

Think of the audacity of God, that he should make us free and insist that we exercise our freedom! He runs the risk that we will become prodigal again, does he not? I remember a cartoon in The New Yorker in which a father looks at his boy and says: "Son, this is the third fattened calf we've killed for you. When are you going to settle down?" God runs the risk that we will become prodigal again, but apparently he would rather run this risk than have a house filled with elder brothers.

"Make me as one of thy hired servants." But the father will have none of it: "This my son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found." What he was really saying was this: "My son, don't be afraid to be free."

### Analysis of the Model Sermon.

The Title. A good title should offer a denouement of the content of the sermon and the title, "Afraid to be Free," certainly does that. The title clearly states the theme of the sermon, the human fear of exercising one's freedom, and one is not left wondering what the sermon is about by a vague, obscure title.

A basic rule on titles is that they should ideally run about five words in length and not more than seven. The four-word title on Campbell's sermon, therefore, is close to the ideal. At times a long title is acceptable, if only for effect, but the general rule seems to be the shorter the better.

A temptation sermon writers must overcome is in getting too cute with titles. Titles should be tasteful. An Easter sermon on the resurrection, which was noted on a church signboard a few years ago, had the title, "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down," a title which far exceeds the bounds of good taste. As does another sermon title observed in a newspaper advertisement, based on the text: "This is my beloved Son..." which read: "That's My Boy!"

Titles should be interesting and arouse curiosity, as Campbell's does. "Afraid to be Free" is interesting because it is a bit paradoxical. Freedom is generally looked upon as something cherished and sought after, not feared. Curiosity is immediately aroused with such a title. Few sermon titles succeed in whetting a person's appetite. As one seminary professor asserts: "The sermon titles usually announced in Saturday newspapers can be expected to cause all but the most faithful to stay away in crowds."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Harvey Seifert, "Preaching as the Impossible Possibility," Christian Ministry IV (November 1973), 3-8.

Sermon titles are more of an exact science than many suppose. Good titles are arrived at after much thought and work. Even though it appears as the first thing in a sermon, the title is many times not created until the sermon is completed or nearly completed.

The Sermon Introduction. Campbell's introduction, roughly the first three paragraphs, is excellent. He wastes no time with opening cliches, like "I want to talk today about...." or "the words of our text are from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 15, verse 19...." Rather, he leads right off with Melville's quote and it is a good one, one that ties directly to the topic and is introductory. It is thought-provoking right off and thereby capable of capturing interest. As Browne observes: "People are generally bored by thoughts they understand too easily and are moved by those they do not fully understand."<sup>3</sup> Melville's quote challenges the listener right away and thereby creates interest in what is to follow. It announces the preacher's intention to deliver a thoughtful sermon, as well.

The second sentence builds upon the first and leads directly to the parable that is to be the basis of the sermon. There's nice alliteration in the sentence, too: "the power of the parable of the Prodigal Son...." The

---

<sup>3</sup>R.E.C. Browne, The Ministry of the Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 75.

third sentence continues to build and to involve the listener. It also spells out the timelessness of the text. The contemporariness of the parable is enlarged upon with the next sentence in showing how we still use certain terms from the parable in everyday speech. The paragraph ends with a punch: "Its yield of truth seems inexhaustible." The groundwork has been effectively laid with a strong and captivating opening paragraph. A reader or listener would want to go on and read or hear more, and that is what an opening paragraph should do.

The second paragraph becomes more defined and yet holds interest; it begins to elucidate on the parable, reviewing the story yet keeping it interesting. An interpretive sentence is then injected by the preacher: "Jesus gave us the story not to illustrate man's sin but to underscore God's love. The prodigal is not the hero, but one of his lines gives us our text." This is interpretive groundwork which the reader or listener needs and is still whetting the appetite for more.

The third and last paragraph of the introduction continues to review, in an interesting way, the parable. Phrases like "rudely asked for his share of the inheritance," add sparkle to the re-telling and hold interest. "Presently his funds run out and, simultaneously, his friends," is an excellent sentence. The text is then announced as the final sentence of the introduction.

This is a "just right" introduction, not too short, not too long, and it doesn't promise more than what will be delivered. It avoids the exaggerated type of introduction W. E. Sangster wrote of:

Years ago I used to pass on my way to church a wee house with an enormous porch. I see it in my mind's eye as I write. Great Corinthian pillars complete with acanthus leaves supported a baroque portico which would have given shelter from the rain for half a platoon of soldiers. On the other side of this enormous porch was something like the cheapest kind of council house. I always smiled as I went by. It reminded me of two things: the man who began to build and had not wherewith to finish, and, also, certain sermons I have heard. All introduction! Ornate splendor round the door...and next to nothing on the other side. The little house by itself could be warm and welcoming and snug. But after that ridiculous porch!"<sup>4</sup>

Merrill Abbey offers four basic things an introduction needs to do after stating that

The introduction must dispel the "ho-hum, here we go again" frame of mind. To do so, it must get quickly to material that matters. No listener will long remain a cooperative communication partner if he is left without help in puzzling out answers to his essential questions: What is the preacher talking about? Why does he bring that up? Over the shortest available route the introduction needs (a) to give forceful statement to the working subject, (b) to help the listener feel how and why the subject is important to him, (c) generally to offer some statement of the proposition, and (d) to throw out some clue as to the way the subject will be attacked. No catchy devices for snaring the listener's interest will long avail if these basic communication needs are bypassed.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>W. E. Sangster, The Kingdom of God (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>Merrill R. Abbey, Communication in Pulpit and Parish (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 175.

The introduction to Campbell's sermon succeeds on all four counts, capturing the reader or listener's attention and fixing it on the central idea of the sermon. Attention-getting introductions on any other basis can only frustrate the listener and defeat the preacher. Abbey states that

One sometimes hears a sermon that begins with fascinating material aimed to avoke interest, and only after some minutes of increasingly perplexed listening, discovers that the idea suggested by the attention-arresting story is not the idea the preacher is really discussing. Backtracking from where the story seemed to point to where the preacher is heading, one falls further behind the thought on the way. Attention captured for its own sake means nothing; attention focused on the main idea is essential.<sup>6</sup>

In Campbell's introduction there are no gimmicks, no wild statements, no non-sequiturs -- just clear-cut, well-crafted sentences that logically build upon one another and clearly lead the reader or listener into the body of the sermon. It is a simple, effective, no-frills introduction that starts to unfold, with a building sense of expectancy, what is to come.

The Body of the Sermon. After leading up to, and reading the text for the sermon, Campbell starts to develop his "ah ha!" -- the human tendency to fear freedom. This is a unique twist on this parable, a new use of it from the standard themes of forgiveness, repentance, love, or the

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.



"elder brother" theme. Taylor Caldwell, the writer, says that "the essence of good writing is in expressing a common experience or emotion in fresh language and with new vitality."<sup>7</sup> This is what Campbell has done in this sermon. His theme is not new; his text is familiar. He has cleverly discovered a new emphasis in the old and familiar and thereby created an interesting twist for a sermon. He is bringing a new light to an old story, a new revelation, a new variation on a theme and done it in different words and from a new angle and with new color.

With the central idea of the sermon made clear, Campbell then proceeds to develop it. He first does this by drawing upon history, both secular and biblical, to show how the theme is ageless and common to all generations. No more than a couple of sentences are necessary to do this; to dwell on the historical or to belabor unnecessary details pertaining to it is to destroy the effect and the pace of the sermon. The present is more interesting than the past and Campbell quickly brings the sermon up-to-date with a quote from Eric Hoffer, a reference to the Nazis, a literary reference, and a thought about Big Government. All this continues and contributes to his central theme and lends contemporary credibility -- that the theme is timely and valid.

---

<sup>7</sup>Taylor Caldwell, "The Essence of Good Writing," in A.S. Burack (ed.) The Writer's Market (Boston: Writer, 1961), p. 22-27.

Before proceeding, he then digresses only slightly and thereby gives a bit of a change of pace, by reiterating the theme with the words, "If it be true that we are forever in danger of surrendering our freedom in exchange for bread, then surely we can find some good words to say on behalf of the dissenters in our society, those who are trying to see to it that no one form of thought should suit us all." This is a disarming approach and a thoughtful, provocative point that contributes to the theme. He illustrates it with a reference to a then-current school strike, making an apt bridge between his theme and a current event with which his congregation could readily identify. He makes sure the point is drawn by reiterating the words of the text.

Another contemporary illustration follows, based on the military and neatly tied to a similar situation in Jesus' time. To make sure the point is gotten across, Campbell spells it out in a neat sentence: "They (defining directives, which the military gives) release us from the need to think for ourselves."

Then another current illustration, the University of Michigan student's indictment of his father's obsession to work and an enlargement on how today's industry makes totalitarian demands upon employees, with I.B.M. and General Motors cited as examples. Two quotes follow, one from the past by Charles Lamb and a current one from a book on the Christian ministry. If the sermon is in danger of breaking

down at any point, I would see it here with two rather lengthy quotations right together. Quotes are risky, especially if long and ponderous and unless they are full of images or relate a vivid happening, it is easy to lose interest. Campbell does intersperse a thought about work taking on a domination, but the quotes are still too close and a bit heavy.

He immediately gets back to his theme after the second quote, however, and in grand style. He starts to bring the message "home" to the listener by asserting that "there is a locked-up potential in us all that frequently remains locked up tight because we have sold our freedom as sons for the security of the system." Again a reiteration of the theme -- "sold our freedom as sons for the security of the system." And, then, two more contemporary illustrations: an opera star (unnamed but presumably known at that time) and a baseball player who walked out of a baseball training camp rather than be told when he had to go to bed. And then a bit of a blockbuster for that time, a reference to a congressman (presumably McCloskey of California) who was one of the first to express dissent on the Vietnam War. An especially strong reference ties it up, one that would appeal readily to the young, with the mention of the popular film The Graduate.

Again, the preacher doesn't get bogged down in detail with each reference. He doesn't get sidetracked by

examining the pro's and con's of each situation, even though there are two sides to each one he uses. It would diminish the effectiveness of the point to objectify each situation. Each reference contributes to the theme of the sermon, and in a slightly different way. By placing them one after the other they tend to increase dramatically toward the theme and to strengthen the preacher's "case."

A good turn in the flow of the sermon is then taken by allowing for a possible objection by the listener. "But we have to eat," you say. This is a good tactic to keep the listener involved and also to be fair by allowing for an opposing opinion. It also shows the preacher anticipates what the listener is thinking. He doesn't dwell on the objection, however, and he shouldn't else he would lose the pace he has established and leave himself vulnerable as far as advancing his theme and working toward the conclusion. He dispenses with the objection with "Yes, but not cake. We must learn to simplify our desires...(again getting back to the theme) so that we will want nothing so badly from the system that we will forfeit our freedom to achieve it."

Then, before advancing toward his next point, he brings in the words of the text again. He really starts to bring it home then by relating it to religion. Some biblical research prefaces the point as Campbell interjects information on the symbolism of the robe, ring, and shoes that the

father placed on the prodigal. This is a nice "break" and contributes solid background information to the sermon, and further establishes credibility. A theological point is then brought forth in that the father readily forgave, no questions asked. A brilliant statement follows up his thoughts on this: "God will not crush out our freedom, even to take us captive."

Campbell starts, then, to bring the message home. A mild accusation is set forth, that we're always tempted to give our soul over for safe-keeping, to exchange our freedom for the security of...an infallible book...tradition...set of principles...church. The transition is made from the world to the church. Campbell develops and answers the point with an apt quote from Martin Luther and then makes the statement of the risk involved in freedom, even in the exercise of one's religion. Masterfully, Campbell then ties it back to the parable by stating how God, especially God, does not want "self-deprecating, groveling, sniveling human beings. Penitent, yes; but as sons who are willing to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." This contributes other biblical support for the sermon theme and shows how the thought pervades other scripture and thereby strengthens the sermon.

The Conclusion. The introductory and closing paragraphs of any piece of writing pose special problems.

Frequently they are the parts of a composition that are hardest to "get right" and that require the most revision. The conclusion is important because a reader's or listener's judgment of a piece of writing or a sermon is often influenced most strongly by the impression that he carries away from the closing section, and also because the writer has his final chance in the conclusion to bring the subject into its proper perspective. For these reasons

the conclusion should not apologize for the subject or for the writer's treatment of it, and should not trail off into broad generalizations which are not relevant to what has been said.... The conclusion should not be anticlimactic or too sudden: it should give the proper final emphasis to the subject and leave the reader with a sense of finality. It should not end on an indecisive note except in those rare cases where the indecision is purposeful and is designed to force the reader to a decision of his own. It should not begin a new subject or a new part of the subject of the composition, though it may occasionally suggest a further application of what has been said...."<sup>8</sup>

Using the most appropriate analogy of an airplane touching down and then having its motors gunned and it becomes airborne again, a pastor in Georgia, states that abortive landings can happen in sermons, too.<sup>9</sup> "Listeners," the pastor of Advent Christian Church, Augusta, Georgia, writes, "get irritated when a speaker reaches a logical stopping point, only to become airborne on a new point or on a

---

<sup>8</sup>Alan B. Howes, An Outline of English Composition (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 242.

<sup>9</sup>David S. McCarthy, "And in Conclusion...." Christianity Today, XX (September 24, 1976), 50-52.

repetition of an old one."

The conclusion of the sermon "Afraid to be Free" avoids these pitfalls. Campbell ties his thoughts together succinctly in one paragraph that begins emphatically: "Think of the audacity of God, that he should make us free and insist that we exercise our freedom!" Here, again, the central theme of the sermon is re-stated with just enough of a unique twist to make it fresh. Campbell then uses humor with the New Yorker cartoon, which fits beautifully. Then serious again: God runs the risk that we will become prodigal again, but apparently he would rather run this risk than have a house filled with elder brothers. Then a re-statement of the text, followed with the comment, "but the father will have none of it," then an affirmative word from the father in the scripture text: "this my son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found," concluding the whole sermon with the powerful sentence: What he was really saying was this: "My boy, don't be afraid to be free." A terrific last sentence, one which even restates the sermon title as the closing words.

Gerald Kennedy once wrote that "For me the conclusion is the most difficult part of the sermon. If the conclusion is right the most important single thing has been done."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Gerald Kennedy, His Word through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 88.

One would think it was for Campbell in this sermon, too. This conclusion, which seems simple and logical in its present form, must have taken hours of struggle to compose. It is short and to the point; it rounds out the sermon; it reiterates the theme and has positive impact. It drives home the central idea one more time and creates a high emotional level. It also summarizes without getting detailed. It uses humor in a way that adds rather than detracts. And it places a definite appeal upon the listener, an invitation to accept the freedom God extends: "Don't be afraid to be free."

The conclusion, Davis says,

is the moment in which listeners can come nearest to seeing the idea as a whole and all at one time. It is the moment in which the issue can be seen at its clearest, felt at its sharpest, and carried back into life where, if anywhere, it must be resolved. The conclusion is the last chance to accomplish the sermon's purpose, whatever that may be. Consequently, this moment is perhaps the most important single moment in the entire continuity. A sermon should conclude, not just stop; it should finish, not just dribble off.<sup>11</sup>

While the conclusion is when "the issue can be seen at its clearest, felt at its sharpest," it is also prepared when the sermon writer is most tired, and the congregation hears it when it is most tired. The danger in this is that the conclusion gets scanty treatment. Perhaps a good

---

<sup>11</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 152.



solution for this problem, according to Sweazey, is to prepare the conclusion after having rested from the working out of the rest of the sermon, a time when the mind is rejuvenated and can look at the material afresh.<sup>12</sup>

The main thing is that the conclusion must be pre-planned, that is written out. And carefully done so with the thought that it truly is the most important part because it usually is the most remembered by the listener.

H. H. Farmer speaks of sermons "that raise the question: "Huh?" When it's over, you try to recall what it said, and conclude only that it said nothing."<sup>13</sup> Such sermons cannot be wrapped up with effective conclusions because they haven't been clear throughout. A conclusion cannot be clear if the sermon body that precedes it is not clear. Farmer continues that such sermons

either take no position or else smug, slogany positions. In place of wisdom and careful analysis, we find, if anything, cant, cynicism, or dramatic gimmickry. Their sermons are interesting and arresting infernal entertainment, but they contain nothing that will hold, nothing that will help.<sup>14</sup>

Norwood Bugione speaks of such preaching as "stratosphere" preaching. It "never gets down to earth where

---

<sup>12</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 100.

<sup>13</sup>H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

ordinary mortals live and breathe, but speaks from a stratosphere of abstract and hazy words,"<sup>15</sup> The careful planning and writing out of the conclusion can avoid these pitfalls.

---

<sup>15</sup>Norwood Bugione, "Keeping it Simple," Christianity Today, XVIII (March 15, 1966), 37-40.

## Chapter 7

## ELEMENTS OF STYLE AND TECHNIQUES IN SERMON WRITING

While writing sermons is a creative art-form and expresses elements of each individual composer, there are general techniques and broad rules that can and must be generally known, learned, and followed to make even the most subjective creation successful. Different sermon writers will excell in different areas; some are strong in stylistic elegance, some have vivid descriptive narrative, others show forth accurate scholarship, some have brilliant touches of humor, some have a gift for clarity or at least a clear point of view, some are adept at drawing analogies, some are skilled at expressing and articulating the hopes, tragedies, fears, joys, and sadnesses of humanity.

Whatever the particular gifts a sermon writer brings to his craft, they are presented in a certain style. Writers throughout history have never agreed on an exact definition of style. The English statesman Lord Chesterfield said, "Style is the dress of thoughts."<sup>1</sup> A French writer, named Buffon, stated that "style is the man himself."<sup>2</sup> There are

---

<sup>1</sup>Alan B. Howes, An Outline of English Composition (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 167.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

elements of truth in both of these statements. Both imply a need for the writer to have a knowledge of himself, and his material or what he wants to say. Both ways require the formulation of standards to guide the writer. It is these qualities which all good writing should have to which we now turn.

### Clarity.

In an essay on Style Arthur Schopenhauer, the nineteenth century German philosopher, bewailed the fact that so few authors took the necessary pains to make themselves clear:

Few write in the way in which an architect builds; who, before he sets out to work, sketches out his plan, and thinks it over down to its smallest details. Nay, most people write only as though they were playing dominoes; and, as in this game, the pieces are arranged half by design, half by chance, so it is with the sequence and connection of their sentences. They only just have an idea of what the general shape of their work will be, and of the aim they set before themselves. Many are ignorant even of this, and write as the coral-insects build; period joins to period, and Lord knows what the author means.<sup>3</sup>

A sure sense of purpose is a foundation for clarity and will enable the writer to build his composition as the architect builds a building. The sermon writer's plan is established in the "ah ha" or the central idea of the sermon.

---

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Style," in his Parerga, 1851.

Unless this is clearly in mind, the preacher cannot hope to make it clear to others. And this is usually fully clarified to the sermon writer only by writing about it. Until this is done, the writer cannot expect the reader or listener to follow him with any degree of ease. Clarity begins with a determination of purpose that should extend from the central idea down to each of its parts.

The mere piling up of thoughts does not make a sermon any more than do piles of bricks, stones and lumber make a house.<sup>4</sup> Design is needed to take fragments of thoughts from different sources and put them together in some kind of sequence that is clear to the listener. "The new unity which results is as unlike the contributing thoughts as the equestrian statue of bronze is unlike the metallic ores when they lay in the mine."<sup>5</sup>

Lack of clarity can destroy an otherwise good sermon. Merrill Abbey says that

not much is achieved by a sermon, whatever its truth or beauty, if its meaning is not clear. Someone at his wits' end listens for a word that may give him a new grip on his troubled life, but little is accomplished without clear meaning. In the first century, Quintilian declared, 'Care should be taken, not that the reader may understand, but that he must understand'; and in the nineteenth century, Spurgeon could still say, "It is not enough to be so plain that you can be understood; you

---

<sup>4</sup>John Thompson, "Imagination in Preaching," Pulpit XXXVII (May 1966), 7-9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

must so speak that you cannot be misunderstood.' Such speech comes only by disciplined work.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible, from which the sermon writer draws his texts, is a model in clarity. It is generally characteristic of the Bible to present its message in vivid images, analogies, and metaphors. The sermon writer must not abandon these in his writing; they are tools for clear expression and communication.

### Words.

A discussion of clarity leads naturally into word selection for no single element of clear communication is more important than accuracy in the selection of words.

Words can be tricky.

Words are wild and elusive. Some go galloping off in unexpected directions. Others stand when they should be seated. The artist with words is a man who can tame them, who can conquer their whims and variabilities and make them behave as they should.<sup>7</sup>

The "taming" of words lies in fully learning what each word one chooses to use signifies. When we know exactly what a word signifies, when it is firmly linked to reality, then meaning becomes clear and unambiguous.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Merrill R. Abbey, Communication in Pulpit and Parish (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 194.

<sup>7</sup>Warren Weaver, "The Case of the Wayward Words," Saturday Review (March 8, 1960), 119.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

In choosing the right word to fit each context, the sermon writer must be sure that both connotation and denotation are appropriate, for two words with roughly the same denotation may have very different connotations, and hence different meanings. It must also be kept in mind that the connotations of a word grow out of the contexts in which the word is normally used. For instance, the word "house" seems simple enough, but think of all the types of related words that have the general meaning of "house": abode, bungalow, cabin, castle, cottage, domicile, dwelling, habitation, home, hovel, hut, mansion, palace, residence, shack, and shanty.<sup>9</sup>

Clarity would demand that, if the writer is talking about a specific kind of house, he should choose the word that describes it most accurately so that the reader may visualize exactly what he is referring to. If he is talking about a palace or a shack, these words will be clearer than "house," since their denotation is more specific. If, however, he cannot find a word which identifies the particular kind of house he is talking about, or if identification is not important, he should normally use the most common general word -- in this case either "house" or "home."<sup>10</sup>

There is power in words but only when a writer learns how to use them with skill. Joseph Conrad, who went to such pains to write his flowing English, said in one of his essays that if he had the right word he could move the world.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Howes, p. 170.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Gerald Kennerly, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 202.

He went on to point out that men are moved not by the right argument but by the right word. Yet finding the right word demands a discipline that most preachers are not willing to follow. We are content to approximate when we seek to express our thoughts.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking to the power of words, Sweazey says, perhaps a bit hyperbolically, that

words are the most powerful physical objects on earth. Whether in the material form of sound waves or of ink, they have a collective force that exceeds that of anything else man can lay hold of -- explosives, rockets, chemicals, or nuclear devices. They are the greatest healers in the world; 2500 years ago Aeschylus declared, 'Words are the physicians of a mind diseased.' Words can make whole nations sick, as Nazi Germany has demonstrated. The wounds from words are the most damaging injuries most people ever suffer. Ministers, who deal with words, can use them for God's glory and for human good. They have to learn to become proficient with this signaling device.<sup>13</sup>

The use of words is a professional matter for the preacher and he should be ready to learn from all masters of words, religious or irreligious, in order that he may better learn how to expose people to the truth. Such a master of words was Ezra Pound who gave this advice:

...Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.... There must be no cliches, set phrases, stereotyped journalese.... Language is made of concrete things. General expressions, non-concrete terms, are a laziness; they are not art, not creation.... The only adjective that is worth using is the adjective that is

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 147.



essential to the sense of the passage and not the decorative frill adjective.<sup>14</sup>

Along this same line, Browne<sup>15</sup> states

Coleridge said that poetry was the best thoughts in the best words, and so is preaching. Those who preach must have a feeling for words, a respect for their worth and a regard for their limitations, remembering always that the context both illuminates and is illuminated by the separate words that make it.... Words have no private lives but their individuality is apparent:

...where every word is at home,  
Taking its place to support the others,  
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
An easy commerce with the old and new,  
The common word exact without vulgarity,  
The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
The complete consort dancing together.<sup>16</sup>

There are, of course, some cautions in the use or misuse of words by the sermon writer. One is to avoid using words for their own sake or for the preacher's sake -- stylistic fiddling where language is used mainly to show off the preacher's gifts. Rhetorically inflated sermons bring to mind a criticism of the Russian writer, Vladimir Nabokov, of whom it was written: "he has written superbly about everything from the pattern of bathroom tiles to the sensations of wine on a jaded tongue. But his virtuosity often

---

<sup>14</sup>Ezra Pound, The True Voice of Feeling (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p. 123.

<sup>15</sup>R.E.C. Browne, The Ministry of the Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 26.

<sup>16</sup>T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets, (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 42-3.

seemed an end in itself and therefore empty, even nihilistic."<sup>17</sup> "You can suffocate a thought by expressing it with too many words."<sup>18</sup>

Another caution in the use of words is to avoid pat expressions. By "pat expressions" is meant such tags as "to all practical intents and purposes," "the pure and simple truth," "from where I sit," "to the ends of the earth," "in the twinkling of an eye," or those lead-ins to illustrations in too many sermons: "I like that story," "It has been said." Cliches come too easily and seem too necessary to be dispensed with. "Other things being equal, avoid phrases like 'other things being equal,'" one writer humorously advises.<sup>19</sup> Those sentences that come to the writer whole, or in two or three doughy lumps, are sure to be bad sentences. They are no creation of yours but pieces of common thought "floating in the community soup."<sup>20</sup>

An overdose of adjectives is another pitfall in the use of words. This was an especially strong sorepoint to H. H. Farmer who advised:

---

<sup>17</sup>George Feifer, "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov," Saturday Review (November 27, 1976), 20-23.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>James M. Salem, A New Generation of Essays (Dubuque: Brown, 1972), p. xxxiii.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Ruthlessly cut out any adjective which is not absolutely essential to, and part of, the truth which you wish to convey. The superfluous adjective is to your message what barnacles and seaweed are to the clean straight lines of a ship designed to cut through the water like the edge of a knife.... Much of the loss of confidence in the pulpit comes from our careless use of modifiers. It is too easy to assume that after we have found the right noun, we may surround it with descriptive terms, and the more the better.... The swing from the empty, pompous rhetoric of Boston orators to the flowering of New England in literature was helped when men got over this horrible disease of too many adjectives.<sup>21</sup>

A preacher needs the precision of the poet. A poet's highest verbal skill manifests itself when we are unconscious of his words, being involved in a living immediate expression or act of mind.<sup>22</sup>

Word selection and usage takes time, skill, and discipline.

Walter Pater, in his essay on style, said that Flaubert was of the opinion that there was one word, one adjective, one verb for every sentence and he would search diligently until he found it. His style was the result of painstaking labor.<sup>23</sup>

Word selection gives a tone to sermons. Word selection clarifies and communicates the basic message on the preacher's mind. The writing out of the words aids the preacher in the selection, elimination, or addition of the

---

<sup>21</sup>H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 61.

<sup>22</sup>Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), p. 295.

<sup>23</sup>Kennedy, p. 144.

necessary words needed to clearly and effectively express and communicate the message.

Interesting Content.

Marquis James, in the story of his Oklahoma boyhood, said that, while the family was Methodist, they usually went to the Congregational Church because the Methodist preacher, though a good and sincere man, made listening to him an act of penance.<sup>24</sup>

One of the first lessons preachers must learn is that something isn't interesting just because they say it. Most of what is dispensed in sermons must be made interesting. And the first general rule to making something interesting is to be interested in it yourself. I have never forgotten a marginal note a university professor wrote on one of my term papers: "You really weren't interested in this subject, were you?" I wasn't, and that lack of interest was apparent. It usually is in sermons, too. Even the most listless listener can determine the degree of interest in a sermon by the composer, and it sets the dial for their degree of interest as well.

It is said of some preachers that they are more like teaching pastors. What is generally meant is that their

---

<sup>24</sup>Stanley Kauffman, "Arts and Lives," New Republic (November 18, 1978), 26.

sermons are instructive but not interesting. An overdose of information in a sermon usually diminishes interest, as

Browne notes:

People do not attend if they do not feel interested, that is if they are not emotionally moved. Some talk about a teaching sermon, or a sermon on doctrine, implying that its purpose is to offer information in as workmanlike style as possible. But burden any sermon with instruction and it ceases to have sharpness and power. Every sermon worthy of the name is instructive, but it is much more because the Gospel is more than a lesson to be taught and learnt. There is no such thing as a teaching sermon that is purely intellectual in its aim and results, nor can there be a sermon which is purely an emotional appeal; mere excitement, no matter how strong, dies leaving little behind it except a thirst for further excitement.<sup>25</sup>

Browne touches upon the opposite danger of being uninteresting, that of gathering sermon material calibrated only in terms of humor or sensationalism. Leander Keck speaks of such sermons that "offer stimulation without content, sensation without feeling."<sup>26</sup> The tossing in of Scripture or profound literary quotations will not balance off the basically shallow and sensational material such sermons employ. That technique is reminiscent of Mark Twain's description of Aunt Polly's prayers as "built from the ground up of solid courses of Scriptural quotations, welded together with a thin mortar of originality."<sup>27</sup> Better it is to strive

---

<sup>25</sup>Browne, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup>Leander E. Keck, The Bible in the Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 110.

<sup>27</sup>Samuel Clemens, Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain (New York: Harper & Row, 1906).

for the goal of the musician Benjamin Britten, of whom it was written, "He was not an avant-gardist. He did not care to shock people. To move them was sufficient."<sup>28</sup>

Various writers of homiletical textbooks list ways in which to inject interest into sermons. Sweazey<sup>29</sup> lists the following ways:

1. Reality. Reality, he states, is making a definite connection with human life. He illustrates by saying that a Biblical sermon that is concerned only with Ezekiel and not with us is lacking in reality. So are sermons about the Bible which never get to our needs. He goes on to say that "sermons fail to have reality when they answer questions we are not asking, or deal with matters that make no difference to us."

2. Emotion. To give attention, according to Sweazey, is to be in tension -- that is, stretched. Unless the preacher can keep up his end of this pull, the attention will draw away from him. He illustrates this by mentioning how violence and sex are mainstays of the entertainment industry and are used as quick and powerful emotions that hold attention. "Christianity offers the preacher the emotional pull of love, loyalty, reverence, awe, joy,

---

<sup>28</sup>Aaron Copland, "Musicians I have Admired," Los Angeles Times, (July 2, 1974), Calendar, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup>Sweazey, pp. 134-142.

indignation, sympathy, delight."<sup>30</sup>

3. People. People are more interesting than things, Sweazey asserts. "A sermon is made more interesting by every personal word -- a name, personal pronoun, title, group term."<sup>31</sup>

4. Giving life to abstractions. Abstractions make sermons deadly dry, says Sweazey, but still abstractions are the preacher's business. He deals with such abstractions as love, sin, grace, and salvation. The solution, he maintains, is to keep abstractions from being bare. They have to be "clothed in human flesh."

5. Making the familiar interesting, rounds out Sweazey's list. The high points in the Bible are well known to most churchgoers. "They will not be on edge to find out how Judas died, or whether Paul prefers law or faith."<sup>32</sup> The preacher must find new and creative ways to make the old fresh and relevant. Just as Andrew Wyeth can paint a picture of a well known old barn that no one has paid much attention to for years -- and can reveal in it what was never seen before -- so a sermon writer must do this with the familiar words and images of Scripture.

---

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

Merrill Abbey has a somewhat similar list with a few additions.<sup>33</sup> He adds:

1. Intensity. We notice a bright light rather than surrounding dimmer ones, he says, a strong color among dull hues, a loud noise rather than the ticking of our watch. Concrete materials are more intense than abstractions.

2. Contrast and novelty. The epigrammatic statement rivets attention. Terse examples and succinct stories can give the sharpness of novelty and contrast, Abbey says.

3. Movement and change. Attention is kinetic, states Abbey. Thought must move. To keep it advancing is vital to interest.

4. Repetition. Abbey illustrates this by stating "the varied twittering of robins outside your window may go unnoticed, but the insistently repeated call of a blue jay compels your attention."<sup>34</sup> Campbell's repeated use of his text in the sermon in the previous chapter is an example of the effective use of repetition.

5. Human Interest. People interest people. Persons, not stock figures, need to march through our material, Abbey states. Speech comes alive as it is personalized. Rudolf Flesch suggests a formula for estimating personal interest in

---

<sup>33</sup>Abbey, pp. 170-176.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 34.



writing:

Count all personal names in your text. Then count all personal pronouns (except the it's and they's that don't refer to people). Next, count all masculine and feminine words such as "uncle" or "spinster" (but not masculine and feminine words such as "teacher" or "employee"). Finally, for good measure, count the two words "people" and "folks." Altogether, the percentage of these words (their number per hundred words of text) will give you a fairly good human-interest yardstick... In good, readable nonfiction... it's usually around six or eight."<sup>35</sup>

6. Internal values and wants. Every person, Abbey states, brings his/her particular wants to a worship service. Edgar Jackson estimates that in any 100 people we might gather, 20 will be struggling with bereavement and grief, 33 with problems of marital adjustment, 50 with serious emotional turmoil, 20 with at least mild neuroses, and from 3 to 8 with guilt and loneliness based on homosexual impulses.<sup>36</sup> The preacher who seeks to interest his people must beam his message to these live, current concerns.

In summary, building interest into a sermon is all-important. A survey was taken of church members to see what they thought had most to do with making a sermon effective.<sup>37</sup> Unanimously they passed up eloquence, dramatic power, emotion, brilliance, and logic to say that being interesting was the

---

<sup>35</sup>Rudolf Flesch, The Art of Readable Writing (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), p. 68.

<sup>36</sup>Edgar N. Jackson. A Psychology for Preaching (New York: Channel Press, 1961), p. 76.

<sup>37</sup>Sweazey, p. 134.

most important. "If a sermon is not interesting, people will not listen to it; then no other quality is of any use."<sup>38</sup>

"Some listeners in churches have accepted boredom as one of the crosses that come with the commitment, but I cannot," states Fred Craddock.<sup>39</sup> He goes on to say that

boredom is a preview of death if not itself a form of death, and when trapped in prolonged boredom, even the most saintly of us will hope for, pray for, or even engineer relief, however demonic. Sincere Sunday worships will confess to welcoming in muffled celebration any interruption of the funereal droning. Be honest: have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew or a bird flew in a window or the lights went out or the organ wheezed or the sound system picked up police calls or a dog came down the aisle and curled up to sleep below the pulpit?<sup>40</sup>

Then there are writing skills that add interest to material. Interest does come from the subject itself but a reader or listener will be more apt to find a piece of writing interesting if the writer also discovers the most effective way to present his ideas through language, giving the various part of his subject their proper emphasis. To achieve the emphasis and interest that will assure the reader's absorbed attention to what he reads, the writer must make subtle choices. These choices involve a specific decision between words, sentence patterns, or methods of development, for

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Fred B. Craddock, Overhearing the Gospel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

emphasis and interest may be achieved either by purposeful repetition or by conscious variation.<sup>41</sup> Variation in sentence length also is a subtle means of holding interest. Too many short sentences or a string of seemingly endless sentences can diminish interest. They need to be artfully mixed in length. The rewriting of a sermon manuscript is the time to consider these finer points to injecting interest.

### Omitting.

The ability to omit is one of the most important skills. Preachers can apply to themselves the observation in a Time book review: "One of the things that Ernest Hemingway taught a generation of imitators was that the way to write good stories is to leave things out. Not just the bad bits, but good ones, so that what remains bears an extraordinary tension."<sup>42</sup> When one illustration, statement, or quotation makes a matter clear enough, it is always a mistake to use another just because it is so good. As Sweazey says, "The quality of a sermon is shown by the quality of the discard heap."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Howes, p. 177.

<sup>42</sup>Time Magazine (May 1, 1972), 81.

<sup>43</sup>Sweazey, p. 117.

Comedian Shelley Berman used to end his night club act by looking at his watch and saying, "I see I have only thirty seconds left, so I'd like to talk about...the world." Audiences invariably laughed. You can't talk about the world in thirty seconds. Or even the Western Hemisphere. Or America. Not even America's foreign policy. In fact, it would take hours of classifying and dividing before it would be possible to arrive at a thirty second topic.

Likewise, with sermons. Second-rate ones almost invariably lack a single, driving theme. Subject matter varies considerably and is dealt with superficially on a hit-and-run basis. Walter E. Hoskin, an Oklahoma City clergyman, recalls the admonitions of his old homiletics professor when he was in seminary many years ago. The professor continually criticized long-winded, rambling sermonic efforts of his students by saying, "Young man, you only need to preach one sermon at a time."<sup>44</sup> Fred Craddock quotes Erik Routley's account of being reduced to mental paralysis by a tour guide who overwhelmed everyone with detailed descriptions of each historical site.<sup>45</sup> Tour guides have no monopoly on the fault, Craddock adds; "many speakers and writers are so exhaustingly complete that there is nothing

---

<sup>44</sup>Walter E. Hoskin, "Letters to the Editor," Harper's (September 1978), 7.

<sup>45</sup>Craddock, p. 115.

left for the listener and reader to do. They do not seem to realize that there are occasions when it is better simply to touch the arm and say, 'Over there is Arlington Cemetery,' and leave it alone."<sup>46</sup>

Gerald Kennedy is emphatic on economizing in sermons:

No matter what man may want to say or how he may want to say it, he must limit himself if he is to say it effectively...

When it comes to preaching I speak with some feeling. Sermons are often bad because they try to say too much at one time. They refuse to come to terms with the human capacity for attention and the human yearning for the dramatic. Preachers go on through the years boring people to death and dulling their own cutting edge, because they will not accept the limitations of their art. In this as in all realms of life, Jesus spoke a guiding word: 'Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.'<sup>47</sup>

### Believability.

Phillips Brooks seems to have hit a solid note with his oft-quoted dictum, "preaching is truth through personality."<sup>48</sup> Both in the writing and the preaching of a sermon the personality of the composer comes through. This has much to do with the credibility of the sermon. Brooks touched on this when he enlarged upon his assertion. He

---

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Kennedy, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup>Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), p. 26.

illustrated his point with the life and preaching of the famous British preacher, F. W. Robertson:

I sympathize very fully with that high estimate which such multitudes of people have set upon those remarkable discourses. I think that in all the best qualities of preaching they stand supreme among the sermons of our time. And one of the most remarkable things about them is the way in which the personal force of the preacher, and the essential power of the truth, are blended into one strong impressiveness. The personality never muddies the thought. I do not remember one allusion to his own history, one anecdote of his own life; but they are his sermons. The thought is stronger for us because he has thought it. The feeling is more vivid because he has felt it. And always he leads us to God by a way along which he has gone himself. It is interesting to read along with the sermons the story of his life, to see what he was passing through at the date when this sermon or that was preached, and to watch, as you often may, without any suspicion of mere fancifulness, how the experience shed its power into the sermon, but left its form of facts outside....

There have, indeed, been preachers and writers whose utterance of truth has fallen naturally in the forms of autobiography, and yet who have been at once strong and broad. You can gather all of Latimer's history out of his sermons, and Milton has given us a large part of his teaching in connection with the events of his own life. But ordinarily that is true in literature, and certainly in preaching, which is true in life. It is not the man who forces the events of his life on you who most puts the spirit of his life into you. The most unreserved men are not the most influential. A reserved man who cares for truth, and cares that his brethren should know the truth, who therefore is always holding back the mere envelope of accident and circumstance in which the truth has embodied itself in him, and yet sending forth the truth with all the clearness and force which it has gathered from him from that embodiment, he is the best preacher, as everywhere he is the most influential man. Try to live such a life, so full of events and relationships, that the two great things, the power of Christ and the value of your brethren's souls, shall be tangible and certain to you, not subjects of speculation and belief, but realities which you have seen and known; then sink the shell of personal experience, lest it should hamper the truth that you must utter, and let the truth go out as the shot goes,

carrying the force of the gun with it, but leaving the gun behind.<sup>49</sup>

Browne concurs that it is the preacher's life that gives believability to what he writes and says. "The minister of the Word is called to be an expert in living rather than an expert in doctrine."<sup>50</sup> And it is the life behind that gives credibility to the sermon, he says. "...the minister of the Word is to be fully alive himself if he is to help men and women to interpret their experiences..."<sup>51</sup> "Any preacher is trivial or incomprehensible if he is not honestly bearing his own burden -- an artificial one will not do."<sup>52</sup>

The preacher who continually preaches on "the wonderful world of me" does not carry such credibility or authority. Such preaching is sheer dilettantism. It makes the speaker feel good. It makes the listener feel good. But it does not change anything in the real world. Halfred Luccock calls such preachers the "confectioners of religion."<sup>53</sup> The credibility of such preachers, he goes on, is curtailed by their practice of putting the broadness of

---

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 119-120.

<sup>50</sup>Browne, p. 47.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Halford Luccock, In the Minister's Workshop (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 39.

the Gospel into simple and short packages. "Many ministers have discovered the magic word relax and have compressed the whole gospel into it, like abbreviating an eighty-eight note piano into one note,"<sup>54</sup> Such oversimplification all but destroys the preacher's credibility.

Fosdick spoke of honesty as the elemental virtue of the preacher. His concept of honesty has to do with speaking the truth instead of telling people what they want to hear and taking unpopular stands if that is what conscience dictates. "The preacher's life is the ultimate test of the sermon's efficacy," Fosdick said.<sup>55</sup> "Preaching is not an isolated act; it represents the preacher's life itself,"<sup>56</sup> Fosdick added. Dr. Fosdick was a man of deep personal integrity. He put into practice his words about truth in preaching. His pacificism during World War II is just one example. His ideas were often questioned, but never his integrity.<sup>57</sup>

Too many preacher's speak on material upon which they have no requisite knowledge. H. H. Farmer took preachers to task on this, stating that too often solutions are proffered from the pulpit on economic, industrial, and

---

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>55</sup>Michael Daves, "Harry Emerson Fosdick Left Us a Treasury of Preaching," United Methodist Reporter, VI, 4 (January 6, 1976).

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.



political problems whose complexity is far beyond the limited knowledge of the preacher.<sup>58</sup> "These problems require expert knowledge which he has not got."<sup>59</sup> Not that the preacher shies away from these areas when they can be touched by the Gospel. Farmer acknowledges that the preacher "ought to be continually laying these matters on the conscience of his people, particularly such as have more knowledge and experience to pronounce upon them, and more immediate power to do something about them."<sup>60</sup>

This point is one of the strong advantages to writing out the sermon. Such practice allows the preacher to check facts and to get them straight in his manuscript before he ascends the pulpit. Ernest Hemingway always checked and rechecked his material from this standpoint because he had an extremely high standard of truth for his work. There is an interesting passage in Baker's biography of Hemingway that relates how the writer, even when he was young and learning his craft in Paris, would struggle to write every sentence to be as true as it could possibly be.<sup>61</sup> "Write the truest sentence that you know," he told himself

---

<sup>58</sup> Farmer, p. 121.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Carlos Baker, Ernest Hemingway, a Life Story (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 84.

as he struggled to get the hang of writing. Then he relates how it took him several weeks to come up with ten of the truest sentences he could write. He realized that such sentences had to emerge from his personal experience and to honestly reflect what he experienced in order to be true. Hemingway knew, Baker states, that when he found he could write completely true sentences "he was on his way at last."<sup>62</sup>

No where is a preacher's credibility more at stake than in his interpretation of his text. H. H. Farmer lays heavy emphasis on this point, that the preacher must be perceived as a perceptive interpreter:

The preacher must himself have a profound reverence for the truth and must take care that in his desire to drive home his main message he never succumbs to the temptation of making statements which are unverified and unverifiable and will not bear critical examination. Such carelessness, even on small matters, quickly destroys confidence. That is one reason why honest and sound exegesis of the text is so important. To twist a text to your message, even if it be a great and true message, imparts a flavor of sham and pretence to the whole thing.<sup>63</sup>

"Exegesis is nothing less than the art of asking fruitful questions of the text, and of doing so in an orderly way."<sup>64</sup> Some scholars refer to the task of getting at what a text meant as exegesis and what a text means as

---

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>63</sup>Farmer, p. 73.

<sup>64</sup>Keck, p. 58.

hermeneutics.<sup>65</sup> In both the preacher is asked to be an accurate interpreter and diagnostician. Davis sees the work of interpretation beginning with honest diagnosis. He says:

A preacher is obligated to an honest realism. He can afford no romantic illusions about mankind. The closer he is to his people, the more he will be aware of their failings as well as their virtues, of their conflicts and anxieties, their doubts and betrayals, as well as their courage and endurance. The honest preacher cannot be simply an apologist for mankind; he cannot take man's side in the mutiny against the holy Will.<sup>66</sup>

In honestly examining and interpreting a biblical text, Sweazey offers this list of ways to avoid being dishonest or abusing the Bible:

1. Proof-texting out of context. Using Bible fragments out of their settings in a misleading way can dishonestly exploit the Scriptures.
2. Pretexting. A sermon may appear to be from the Bible because it has a Bible setting, though the passage says nothing that the sermon says.
3. Text stretching. We are supposed to use exegesis, which means getting out of a text the meanings that are there; we are not supposed to use eisegesis, which means putting into a text meanings that are not there.
4. Text twisting. It is usually unsafe to preach from inferences. What the Bible may seem to imply is not a clear enough guide.
5. Text desertion. A text is often used like the first-stage rocket on a space vehicle. It gets the sermon into orbit and then is jettisoned. Sweazey charges that text desertion is "fraudulent advertising. The congregation

---

<sup>65</sup>Craddock, p. 76.

<sup>66</sup>Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 229.

is asked to give its attention with the implication that the text will be used, then the preacher breaks the contract and gives the consumers something other than what was promised."

6. Uninspired sources. The Bible relates some of what is not at all the word of God...the sayings of cynics, doubters, atheists, and scoundrels of all sorts.

7. Allegorizing. "A preacher with a good imagination can ornament his sermons with symbols the Bible does not authorize. When he does, he is making the Bible say what is not intended."

8. Embellishment. The Bible's sparseness of detail leaves wide room for preachers' imaginations, and they richly use it.<sup>67</sup>

Another characteristic that diminished believability in preaching is the habit of exaggeration. This is somewhat akin to Sweazey's embellishment. Kennedy decries this habit:

They do not mean to be dishonest, but they have never severely disciplined themselves to speak with extreme care and restraint. Under the excitement of the actual delivery of the sermon, we tend to speak of "the greatest," "the best," "the worst." Often such statements will not stand close scrutiny, and in our own cooler moments we would be the first to see that we overstated the proposition.<sup>68</sup>

A related fault that destroys credibility is emphasizing one truth over another in a text, primarily because it fits the argument and the other would weaken it. Kennedy also speaks to this distortion when he writes that

this is not done deliberately as a rule, but it is a vicious habit which becomes worse with the years. The time comes when a careful thinker and scholar dismisses our preaching with contempt for he spots the distortions of our message. Like the boy who cried "Wolf" too often,

---

<sup>67</sup>Sweazey, pp. 163-168.

<sup>68</sup>Kennedy, p. 101.

we may become those whom no one believes until he has carefully investigated for himself.<sup>69</sup>

Exaggeration or overstatement can be used safely when it is obvious to the reader or listener that the preacher does not expect to be taken literally. Their use may result in a clearer perception of an idea, a humorous view of a situation, or a shocking of the reader into awareness and hence into action. It is also legitimate and effective to use exaggeration for oratorical effect. Churchill was a master at this: "This is our finest hour," and "never have so many owed so much to so few." This is not exaggeration in the sense of being misleading and adds impact to the message.

### Beauty.

The final element of style we would include is beauty. A work of art must have an element of beauty and the beauty in a sermon is in both what is said and how it is said. Beauty in a sermon does not come from adornment, but in the successful implementation of most of the preceding elements: clarity, word selection, etc. In addition, attention must be given to rhythm of sentences and to tone. In this the preacher must trust his ear. Sweazey gives an example of this by use of Thomas Paine's famous sentence,

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

"These are the times that try men's souls,"

When the sounds are changed, the sentence dies -- for example, 'Times like these try men's souls,' 'These are trying times for men's souls,' 'Soulwise, these are trying times,'

Likewise, when Lincoln began his Gettysburg Address, 'Fourscore and seven years ago,' he risked transgressing against brevity, common sense, and ordinary usage because the sound of those opening words was so important. The natural 'eighty-seven years ago' would not do.<sup>70</sup>

Developing this style takes much practice and time. The writing out of sermons affords the composer the time to play with words and sentences to achieve the rhythm and music that will make them rememberable and add to the beauty of the sermon. Caution must be given to making this an end-all and a game of alliteration. There is a fine line between good rhythm and lulling the listener to sleep by making something too smooth.

While function seems more popular now than beauty, witness the newer Bible versions over against the King James, for example, yet beauty does not go out of date. Shakespeare, roses, sunsets manage to hang around. Beauty in a sermon is still appreciated, too and, as Sweazey says, "The more beauty a sermon has, the better it will communicate God's love and loveliness."<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>Sweazey, p. 143.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

## Chapter 8

## SUMMARY

H. H. Farmer once quipped, "God may indeed use the foolishness of preaching, but we are under obligation to see that it is not more foolish than it need be."<sup>1</sup> The intention of this paper is to stress that the composition of the sermon which the preacher preaches can raise the level of the sermon to an art-form, high above the level of "foolishness," and to set forth the basic methods of doing so. The argument is that the sermon which is thoughtfully and skillfully composed will not only provide the preacher with a basically sound sermon to deliver, but also will leave a suitably sound literary piece for future reading.

The writing out of a sermon, we have attempted to state, gives the preacher two advantages: He or she can plan first and then can polish afterwards. These operations help the sermonizer to crystallize ideas and to present them in their most effective form.

We have recognized that writing and speaking require different styles, and that care must be taken in delivery that the sermon does not come out as a written piece and

---

<sup>1</sup>H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 229.

therefore sound unnatural. In Sweazey's words, "A sermon should be a live communication from a person to persons, not the rendition of a piece of literature that was prepared in solitude."<sup>2</sup>

We have noted that writing is hard work and requires discipline; this holds for even the seemingly-gifted preacher. Even Harry Emerson Fosdick found it hard. "Preaching for me," he once said, "has never been easy, and at the start it was often exceedingly painful."<sup>3</sup>

The writing out of the sermon, reflecting upon it, and writing it again provide for the best thinking to share with a congregation. Writing gives a chance for strong and good emotions to develop and get into the sermon. Writing does not inhibit inspiration, it keeps it. Much of the best thought that comes during sermon preparation will be lost before the sermon is delivered unless it is preserved in writing.

Writing makes it possible to state thoughts in their best possible way to make them clear, powerful, and beautiful. It can also save the speaker from making impulsive utterances which may later be regretted.

---

<sup>2</sup>George Edgar Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup>Deane William Ferm. "The Living of These Days: A Tribute to Harry Emerson Fosdick," Christian Century XCV (May 3, 1978).



A written sermon will also provide more confidence for the preacher. He or she will not be subject to how he or she happens to feel in the pulpit, where nervousness, tiredness, ill health, or the injection of some church problem a lay person thoughtlessness unloaded on him or her just before the service can keep the mind from working at its best. A danger here, of course, is that the preacher must not become dependent upon the manuscript and thereby let it come between the pulpit and the pew and thereby diminish communication.

A written sermon, we would caution, must not become an end in itself and in lifting a sermon up as an art-form we do not mean to imply this. The sermon must first of all be a communicative piece. Sweazey warns against this in stating that

good writing can be the enemy of good preaching if the author falls too much in love with what he has produced. A minister with literary gifts may labor over every word until the sounds and the meanings within the meanings are exactly right. Then he may not have the fortitude to risk all this loving artistry to the hazards of what he may remember while he is speaking to the congregation. So, relying on his memory or manuscript, he delivers the sermon word for word as it is written. He is not really speaking to the congregation, but to his artist's conscience and to the imaginary editors who may sometimes clamor for his manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Sweazey, p. 119.

We have stressed that substance or content is extremely important in sermon composition, that what is presented is as important if not more important than how it is presented. One cannot compose sermons in a hermetically-sealed barrel; extensive reading, exposure to people and their experiences, and other forms of research are needed to provide "meat" for the sermon. Kennedy points out well that

much of our reading will not contribute directly to our sermons, but it will be there by implication. The well-read preacher reveals by a word here or a reference there that he is aware of the thought currents of his day and has taken the trouble to learn the throes of his time. Such a man will not be driven to fall back upon the last book he managed to read, and fill his sermon with it to the distress of the better-read people of his congregation. Nor will a single book become too important.<sup>5</sup>

The form of the sermon, we stated, is basically the same as any literary piece in that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but there are variations of form within that elementary form. The sermon writer should strive for variety and not fall victim to the three-point form and any other particular form that can become habitual. The form should always keep the sermon from becoming haphazard and shapeless.

The elements of style in chapter seven are basic and should be ingrained in any sermon writer who takes the task

---

<sup>5</sup>Gerald Kennedy, His Word Through Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 99.

seriously and responsibly. Adherence to these basic elements makes it possible for the preacher to talk seriously about complex matters without over-simplifying. Proper word selection clarifies the thoughts to be presented and avoids linguistic opacity.

Integrity in attention to facts is especially important in a preacher's style. If one is not sure about a statement, it ought to be made clear. Bishop Kennedy stressed this point to his preachers and wrote about it:

Facts are stubborn things and can wreck our influence if we deal with them carelessly. Even as the preacher should expect no special treatment in his community, so should he be as responsible for his statements as the most careful thinker. Hardly anything so weakens our position as over-statement, and preachers would do well to learn the effectiveness of understatement. When God called me to the ministry He did not give me the right to deal with truth as if it existed to suit my own convenience. We will do much toward restoring the lost authority to the pulpit if we begin to develop a more sensitive conscience toward the precise use of words.<sup>6</sup>

Phillips Brooks said that "the world has not heard its best preaching yet."<sup>7</sup> If the best is yet to come will it not come through mastery of the craft and art of sermon composition? True art clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns. A good

---

<sup>6</sup>Kennedy, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup>Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), p. 33.

sermon does this and as the sermon writer attempts to do this with each creation he or she seeks to reveal, as the Bible does with a story, a proverb or a parable, the substance of truth.

Sermon writing is difficult, as all art is difficult. But, behind the onerous task lies a fulfilling joy and the joy increases as skill increases.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Abbey, Merrill R. Communication in Pulpit and Parish. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973.
- Baker, Carlos. Ernest Hemingway, a Life Story. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.
- Black, Edward M. Robert Frost: The Later Years. New York: Random House, 1973.
- Blackwood, Andrew W. The Protestant Pulpit. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1947.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A Year's Pulpit Work. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Biographical Preaching for Today. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Fine Art of Preaching. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976.
- Brooks, Phillips. Eight Lectures on Preaching. London: S.P.C.K., 1959.
- Browne, R.E.C. The Ministry of the Word. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.
- Burack, A. A. (ed.) The Writer's Handbook, Boston: Writer, 1961.
- Clemens, Samuel. Tom Sawyer, by Mark Twain. New York: Harper & Row, 1906.
- Cox, Martha Heasley. A Reading Approach to College Writing. San Francisco: Chandler, 1966.
- Cox, W. James. A Guide to Biblical Preaching. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Twentieth Century Pulpit. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- Craddock, Fred B. Overhearing the Gospel. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.

- Davis, Henry Grady. Design for Preaching. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958.
- Day, Lewis C. The Poetic Image. London: Cape, 1947.
- Decker, Randall E. Patterns of Exposition. Boston: Little, Brown, 1966.
- Eliot, T. S. Four Quartets. London: Faber & Faber, 1944.
- Erdahl, Lowell O. Preaching for the People. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976.
- Fant, Clyde. Preaching for Today. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.
- Farmer, H. H. The Servant of the Word. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942.
- Flesch, Rudolf. The Art of Readable Writing. New York: Harper & Row, 1949.
- Holland, DeWitte T. Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit 1630-1967. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971.
- Howes, Alan B. An Outline of English Composition. New York: Doubleday, 1962.
- Jackson, Edgar N. A Psychology for Preaching. New York: Channel Press, 1961.
- Kaufman, Walter. "I and You: A Prologue," in Martin Buber, I and Thou, tr. by Walter Kaufman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.
- Keck, Leander E. The Bible in the Pulpit. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- Kennedy, Gerald. His Word Through Preaching. New York: Harper & Row, 1947.
- Luccock, Halford. Communicating the Gospel. New York: Harper & Row, 1954.
- \_\_\_\_\_. In the Minister's Workshop. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954.
- MacLennan, David A. Pastoral Preaching. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955.

- Massey, James Earl. The Sermon in Perspective. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976.
- Ong, Walter. The Presence of the Word. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971.
- Paul, J. N. Literary Ethics. London: Massey, 1944.
- Pound, Ezra. The True Voice of Feeling. London: Faber & Faber, 1953.
- Rad, Gerhard von. Biblical Interpretations in Preaching. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973.
- Salem, James M. A New Generation of Essays. Dubuque: Brown, 1972.
- Sangster, W. E. The Craft of the Sermon. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Kingdom of God. London: S.P.C.K., 1966.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. Parerga, tr. T. Bailey Saunders, 1851.
- Sexton, Virgil. Listening to the Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972.
- Stevenson, Dwight E. Reaching People from the Pulpit. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967.
- Sweazey, George Edgar. Preaching the Good News. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976.
- Thoreau, Henry. The Heart of Thoreau's Journals, ed. by Theodore Stein. New York: Harper & Row, 1947.
- White, E. B. Letters of E. B. White, ed. by Margaret White. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1969.
- Wiseman, Neil B. Biblical Preaching for Contemporary Man. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976.

#### Periodicals

- Bayle, Pierre, "Wraparound." Harper's, LXXXVIII, 10 (June 1972), 97.



- "Boswell's Johnson." New York Review of Books (February 1975).
- Bugione, Norwood. "Keeping it Simple." Christianity Today, XVIII (March 15, 1966), 37-40.
- Campbell, Ernest T. "Afraid to Be Free." Pulpit Resource, V, 1 (1977), 10.
- Copland, Aaron. "Musicians I Have Admired." Los Angeles Times (July 2, 1974) Calendar, p. 92.
- Cousins, Norman. "Editorial." Saturday Review (April 15, 1978), 11.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Polishing the Script." Saturday Review (November 11, 1958).
- Daves, Michael. "Harry Emerson Fosdick Left Us a Treasury of Preaching." United Methodist Reporter, VI,4 (January 6, 1978).
- DeBrazioa, Carlos. "Profile of An Artist." Saturday Review, (May, 1976), 44-47.
- Duke, Shearlean. "To Teach Writing." Los Angeles Times (April 30, 1977), View Section, p. 9-11.
- "Events & People." Christian Century (August 2, 1978), 441.
- Feifer, George. "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov." Saturday Review (November 27, 1976).
- Ferm, Deane William. "The Living of These Days: A Tribute to Harry Emerson Fosdick." Christian Century, XCV (May 3, 1978), 30-33.
- Gardner, Marvin A. "The Word Within." College of Preachers Newsletter (January 1976).
- Halbertstrom, David. "Winners and Losers." Los Angeles Times Book Review (January 9, 1977).
- Kauffman, Stanley. "Arts and Lives." New Republic (November 18, 1978).
- Kennedy, Gerald. "Guest Preacher." Pulpit Resource V (Second Quarter, 1977).
- McCarthy, David S. "And in Conclusion..." Christianity Today, XX (September 24, 1976).

New York Times Book Review (October 6, 1940).

"Points to Ponder." Reader's Digest (October 1973).

Sanders, Carl J. "We Need to Improve Preaching." United Methodist Reporter (January 11, 1974).

Seifert, Harvey. "Preaching as the Impossible Possibility." Christian Ministry, IV (November 1973), 3-8.

"Sinatra, the Man." New York Review of Books (October 1960).

Sweeney, Louise. "C.P. Snow; Secrets of Writing a Novel." Christian Science Monitor (January 3, 1979).

"A Talk With John McPhee." Christian Science Monitor (August 31, 1978).

Thompson, John. "Imagination in Preaching." Pulpit, XXXVI (May 1966).

Time Magazine (May 1, 1972).

Weaver, Warren, "The Case of the Wayward Words." Saturday Review (March 8, 1960).

#### Primary Sources

Eldersveld, Peter. "The Modern Pulpit," printed sermon of Back to God radio broadcast.